

Grappling with the New Testament

Session 5



Jesus the Figure of Faith



Learning for
Discipleship
Programme

2023 - 2025

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Session 5: Jesus the Figure of Faith

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Who was Jesus? What was Jesus? How are we to make sense of the versions and partial insights into his life, his teaching, his service, his suffering and the stories of his death and resurrection?
 - 1.2 From the time of the Early Church as it grew beyond a situation as a Jewish sect, the debate has continued – occasionally with violence, often with profound disagreement and notably unsuccessfully defined by the great councils of the Church.
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Activity 1: How many Jesuses?

Appendix A (below) has a ‘collage’ of different images of Christ, from a variety of cultures and sources (*these will be shown on screen during the session*).

- What sort of pictures of Jesus did you grow up with?
 - With one or two others in the group, discuss the images in **Appendix A** and what they seem to be showing us about the artist’s (or his or her community’s) belief or understanding of the nature of Jesus.
 - As a whole group share your thinking.
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- 1.3 In this session we will concentrate on the way in which the understanding developed in the first Church and churches. This development and transformation in understanding of who Jesus was and is reflected both in the Gospels and also in the letters of Paul the Apostle.
- 1.4 The story does not stop with the New Testament. Through the history of the Church, especially in its first centuries, arguments, debates and hostilities arose about what or who Jesus was. Was he human? Was he divine? Was he both? Did he only pretend to be human? Was he adopted by God and then made divine. This whole debate, looked at from our perspective, may seem worthy of something from a Monty Python sketch. But it was important enough for the Church to set out in formulæ (which we call the Creeds) what was deemed as Orthodox and what was not.
- 1.5 The debate continues today both within and between different Christian traditions.

2. The Jews with a Difference

Session presentation: 'Jews with a difference – the communal experiment' – the life of the primitive, Jewish Church and its struggle with openness.

- 2.1 Glimpses of the life of the Jerusalem Church are gained from snippets of the story contained in Acts of the Apostles.

Activity 2: The Life of the Jerusalem Church

Read the *first 5 chapters of Acts* (please note we will concentrate on the Day of Pentecost elsewhere)

Christology

Note down;

- What we learn about the leadership and structure of the Jesus group in Jerusalem
- what we see of the worshipping life of this community.
- what we learn of its relationship to the Jewish community in Jerusalem
- what would seem to be their understanding of the nature of Jesus (**'Christology'**)

Christology

Christology is the term used to describe the theology of the person of Jesus of Nazareth – was he the divine and human in his two natures? Prophetic figure or cosmic bringer of salvation? These debates still swirl around the Christian churches. In the past they were the cause of major controversies and conflicts.

Now ask yourself what questions we should ask to best understand the nature of the text (Acts 1 to 5) we are using to try to answer the four enquiry points above (you may wish to refer back to session 1 and its resources for this).

Question for preparation and to discuss in the group throughout this session

In the light of the four Gospels, do you think that Jesus thought of himself as divine? What evidence from Scripture supports your position?¹

- 2.2 Church historians point to the wholly Jewish character of the first 'church' in Jerusalem. It was led Apostolically with Peter at the head. However, he seems to have been replaced by James, the brother of Jesus before too long.
- 2.3 Scholars describe a Christology then which had a view of Jesus as Messiah h and prophet – and human. This view is articulated in several articles – see recommended reading at the end of this resource. (e.g., Vermes Ch 3, Trevor Ling Ch 3 paras 3.44 and 3.46 & 3.47) in detail and will be the subject of a tutor-led presentation '**Jews with a Difference**'¹ Such scholarship points to the totally Jewish character of the Jerusalem Church and its apparent view of Jesus as 'Messiah / Prophet'. The Jerusalem Church did not accept growing pressure to admit non-Jewish members by baptism unless they fully adopted the Jewish law.

3. Messianic Secret?

- 3.1 'Who do people say that I am?' asks the Jesus of the Gospel narratives.

Peter's profession of faith [// Mk 8:27–30; // Lk 9:18–21]
¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of man is?' ¹⁴And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But you, who do you say I am?' ¹⁶ In answer Simon Peter said, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ In reply Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ So I now say to you: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church...."²


- 3.2 '**Messiah**' had normally been understood as a person chosen by God to bring about the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. The Messiah would be human, he would be prophetic, he would be charismatic, he would be the instrument of God's purposes and the hope of the Jewish people, currently under foreign tutelage.
- 3.3 The expression '**Son of the living God**' (verse 16) has been understood in the Church in ways which are distinctly different from the meaning of this expression within the Judaism of the first century CE.

¹ All Presentations with their notes will be available on line and also made available on DVD-ROM at the end of the module.


² Matthew 16 verses 13-18 Revised New Jerusalem Bible Translation © Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. Wansborough, Henry

Discussion points

- How do you understand the meaning of the phrase ‘Son of the living God’? How have you come to that understanding?
- Try to discover how this expression is likely to have been understood by the Jewish community of Jesus’s time.

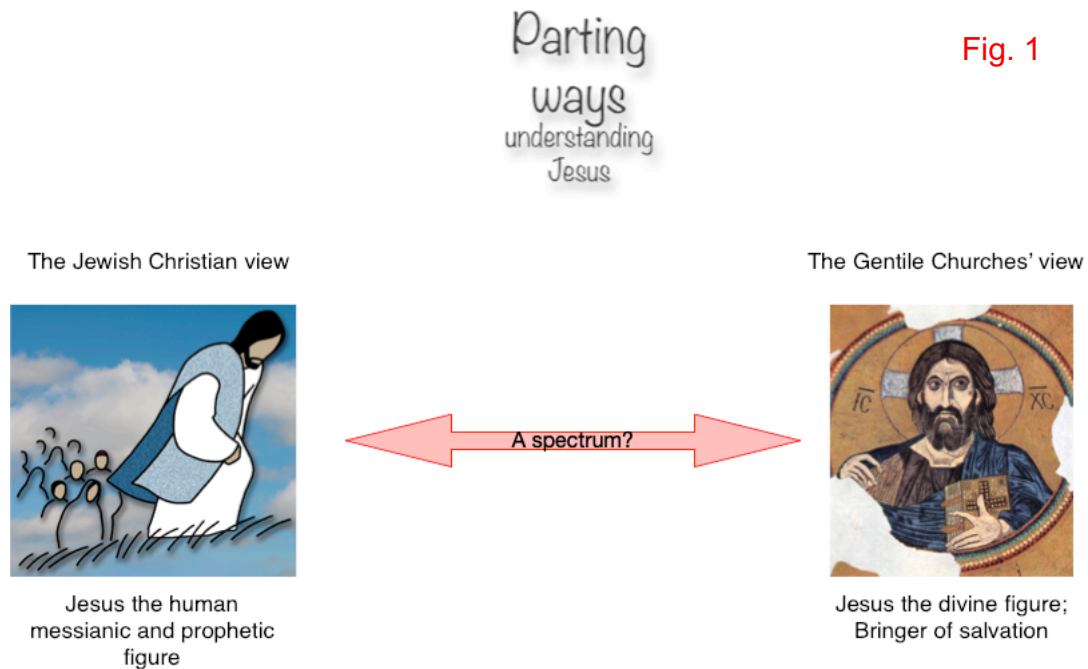
- 3.4 Several times it is reported in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Luke, Matthew) that Jesus instructed his followers to remain silent about his ‘messiahship’. We need to recall those key questions to bear in mind when studying any Biblical text (see session 1 and its resources). By that time the parting of the ways was clearly under way – the Jewish Christians were dispersing, their influence in the widening spread of Christian churches in the eastern Mediterranean area was waning and the more exulted ‘Christology’ powerfully developed by Paul in the late 40s and the early 50s CE was becoming dominant.
- 3.5 Consider the extracts in [Appendix B](#) (Jewish Christian Belief) and [Appendix C](#) (below) from ‘How to read the New Testament’³ in relation to the earliest of the Gospels – Mark
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Activity 3 – understanding Jesus then and now

- List the various titles ascribed to Jesus and by whom in Mark’s narratives.
 - Which ‘understandings’ of the nature of Jesus are the more prominent today?
 - Jesus is not known to have written anything (apart from some lettering in the sand!). Discuss the cautions we should take note of when reading accounts of Jesus’s teaching and actions in the Gospels (again – consider the questions itemised in para 2.8.3 of Part 1 of the Module Study Guide).
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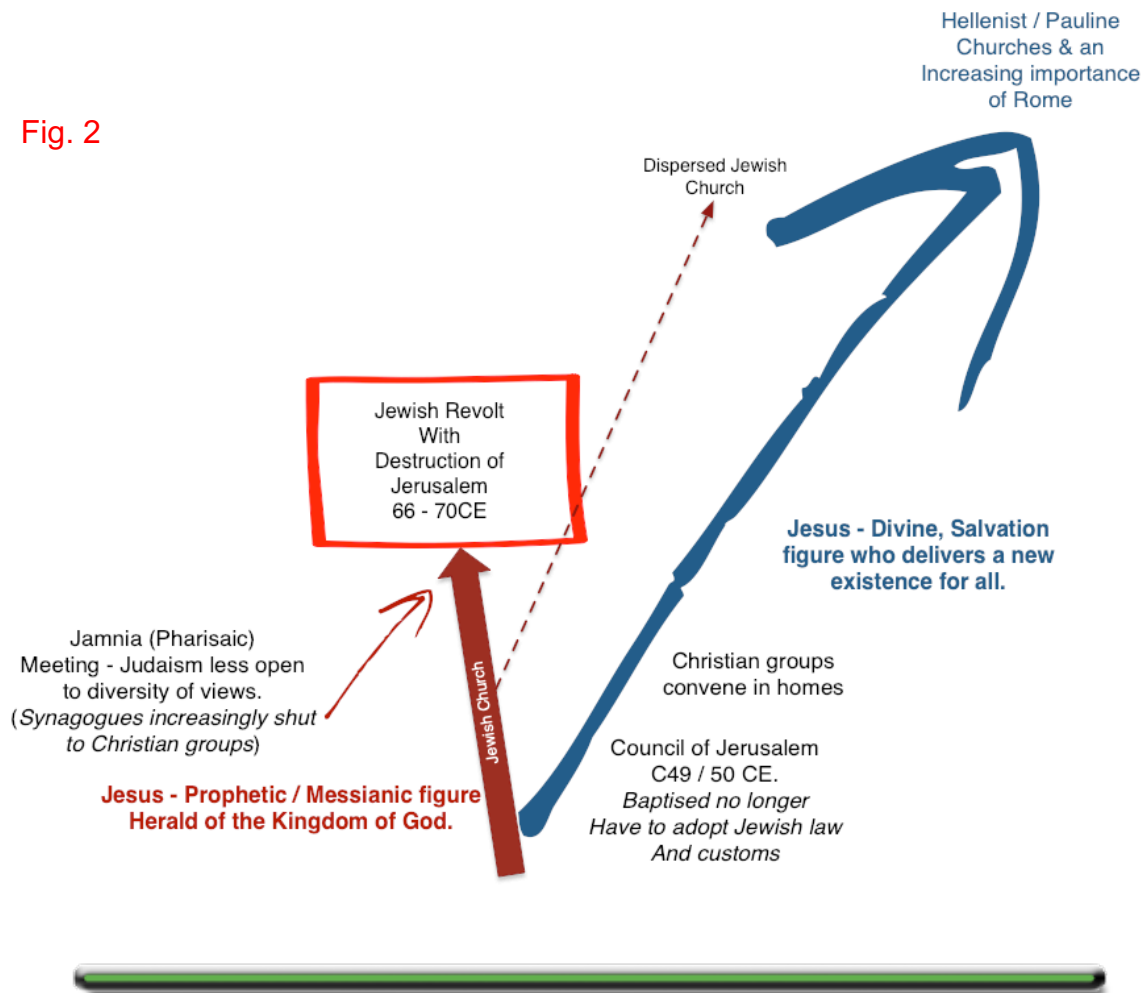
³ Charpentier ibid pages 58 and 59

4. The Fall of Jerusalem and the radical shift in Christology



- HS August 23
- 4.1. Read again the four points set out on [page 8 of the resource for session 1](#). This sets out how the Fall of Jerusalem accelerated the growing split between the Jewish mainstream (i.e., the Synagogues) and the evolving Jewish Christian Church.
- 4.2. [Fig. 2](#) (below) tries to show the radical shift away from a Jewish-centric Church and the irresistible rise of the Hellenist, Gentile, urban Church of the eastern Mediterranean. In this Paul was both agent and instigator – a 'serendipitous point of departure'; unpredicted in his coming and unforetold in his impact.

Fig. 2



Activity 4: The rift

- Read more about the impact of the Fall of Jerusalem and the decline of the Jewish Christian Church. ([Appendix E](#) gives a reading list)
- Discuss Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 23 verses 1 to 33) and the apparent conflicts of Jesus with the Pharisees. Consider them in the context of the *Jamnia* developments by the Pharisees and their hardened attitude to Jewish Christians;
 - What has become the differentiating markers between the Pharisees and the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel?
 - Who is speaking – 'the Jesus of the 30s or the risen Lord of the 80s and 90s attacking the Pharisees of Jamnia'?⁴

⁴ Charpentier, 'How to Read the New Testament' ibid page 31



Fig. 3
The Triumphal Arch of Titus in Rome (c82 CE) showing the sack of Jerusalem and carrying away the Temple treasures.

5. Pushing Boundaries – Paul’s ‘arrival’!

- 5.1 The founding figures of the Jerusalem Church, led initially by Peter and then by James, brother of Jesus, were Aramaic-speaking, Galilean, Jewish men. They had all walked and talked with Jesus; shared meals and crossed hostile territory together. All had time to ‘inwardly digest’ the teachings and the spirit of Jesus’s radical approaches to traditional Judaism. They had known him personally and intimately.
- 5.2 Saul of Tarsus presents a very different person with a startlingly different starting point on his journey along the Way.



We concentrate on St Paul and the growth of the Church in sessions 6 and 7

Appendix A; Christ in Art
For use in Activity 1, session 5.



Appendix B: What Jewish Christians Believed⁵

In the earliest Jewish Christian community, belief in the one God was so much taken for granted that the idea of rivalry from another being who was equal to God a priori could not arise. That the one who had been executed had been exalted by God to God and now (wholly in accordance with Psalm 110) occupied the place of honour 'at the right hand of God', that he had now been made 'Lord and Messiah' through the resurrection and now is the pioneer, bringer of salvation and coming judge of the world - all this was regarded in the Jewish Christian paradigm - and also in Paul and John - not as rivalry to faith in the one God but as its consequence.

Jesus Christ was the embodiment of the rule and kingdom of God, which could now be experienced in the Spirit. Baptism was a tangible sign of faith, first 'in the name of Jesus' and finally also 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' - a liturgical development of the Christological formula in Matthew's community. Baptism took place in the name of the one (the 'Son') in whom the one God himself (the 'Father') is with us through his Spirit (the 'Holy Spirit'). And yet there is no doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament.

Appendix C: The Mystery of Jesus

Reflections by Etienne Charpentier.

From his very first words, Mark lets his readers into the secret: the Gospel of Jesus, Christ, Son of God. Two titles appear beside his name, Jesus, which identifies him as a man: Christ/Messiah and Son of God. John the Baptist claims to be the forerunner of the Messiah, and the Father proclaims to Jesus that he is his Son (Mark 1;1-13). So the reader knows what is going on. However, from this point on he is invited to share with the disciples their slow discovery of the mystery of Jesus. This takes place in two stages.

In the first stage (Mark 1;14-8 and 26), Jesus proclaims the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, and gives signs of its coming, miracles. However, he refuses to say who he is and forbids the demons to divulge it: there is a secret, what has been called the 'messianic secret'. The only title which Jesus applies to himself is the mysterious title Son of man.

The second part (Mark 8;27 - 16.8) begins with Peter's proclamation, 'You are the Messiah.' We have the impression that Jesus breathes a sigh of relief; one step has been taken: his disciples have seen one part of his mystery. At the same time, however, he is disturbed: there is a risk that they, too, will get the wrong idea about the Messiah, will see in him the liberator who will establish the kingdom of Israel by force of arms. He forbids Peter to communicate his discovery, and at the same time leads his disciples towards the second stage: the Son of man will suffer and be put to death!

⁵ 'Christianity: Its Essence and History' page 94 by Hans Küng translation: John Bowker © SCM Press Ltd. 1995 ISBN 0 334 02584 2

In a series of controversies at Jerusalem (Mark chapters 11-13), Jesus introduces another title, Son of David. That, too, is dangerous, and only heightens the opposition from the religious authorities. Here we are at the heart of the drama. These authorities were looking for the Messiah, and one would expect that they were most qualified to recognise him when he appeared. However, they had a very precise idea of him, their idea. Now Jesus presented himself as the Messiah, but he did not correspond to their ideal. Opposition between these two conceptions became so strong that someone had to die: either the authorities had to die to the notions they had previously entertained and accept this disconcerting Messiah, or they would persevere with their ideas and Jesus had to die. Because he knows that he is already condemned, and that there is therefore no danger that he will be taken to be a temporal Messiah, in the dramatic scene of the judgment before the Sanhedrin Jesus clearly declares himself to be Christ. And he is condemned to death.

However, at the foot of the cross a Gentile takes over and finally recognises Jesus as Son of God. Jesus, condemned by the Sanhedrin, and the centurion, over the corpse of a crucified man, tell us the journey that has to be made for the confession of Christian faith to be true.

And by means of this drama, Mark continues to make us ask questions. Jesus is disconcerting! Are you ready to die to the idea you have of him, in order to accept him as he is? ⁶

Appendix D: The Identity of the Early Christian Church⁷

Christian groups were not quite like synagogues, nor were they quite like the optional devotional associations looking to exotic deities from abroad - though they had very obvious affinities with both, as the earliest records testify. Their language about themselves was, however, strikingly different. There were at least three elements in this that would have caused puzzlement, especially when put together. In the texts they read to each other in their assemblies, Christians referred to themselves as *hagioi*, as people who were holy or sacred. They called the groups in which they met *ekklisiai*, 'civic assemblies'. And they also described themselves as *paroikoi* or *paroikountes*, 'resident aliens' or 'settled migrants'. They claimed, in other words, that they occupied a distinctive place, the territory that belongs to the divine, that their corporate identity could be compared to a sanctuary; that they were 'citizens' of something; and that their actual roots and loyalties were in another context than the cities in which they actually resided.

A citizen of the empire encountering this sort of vocabulary and reflecting upon it would have been forced to conclude that Christians were identifying their sacred power as something connected with their status as somehow outsiders in the imperial structure. Reluctance to serve in the army or to accept civic office would have reinforced the point. These were people who saw their privileged access to sacred power and legitimacy as bound up with a deliberate and systematic distancing from the legitimate power of the sacred order of the empire; the claim to

⁶ From 'How to Read the New Testament' by Etienne Charpentier. Pages 58 and 59

⁷ © 2005 and 2014 by Rowan Williams. Published by Darton Longman and Todd Ltd. ISBN 978 0 232 53032 2

be both citizens (with the right to a civic assembly) and settled aliens could not but read as a statement of foreign allegiance, even if this was not allegiance to a specific foreign power. The language that defined 'church' was unmistakably a language that raised problems for a system claiming to be the ultimate source of holy and legitimate power.

Rowan Williams.

Appendix E: Further Reading Suggestions for Session 5 (Jesus of Faith)

- 'Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicæa 30-325'** by Geza Vermes (especially chapters 2 and 4). © 2012 and published by Penguin Books. ISBN 978 0 141 03799 8.
- 'A History of Religion East and West'** by Trevor Ling (especially pages 155 – 160). © 1968 and published by Macmillan Press (and for the Open University). ISBN 0 333 10172
- 'How to Read the New Testament'** by Etienne Charpentier. © 1981 Les Éditions du Cerf. Translated by John Bowden and published by SCM Press. ISBN 0 334 02056 5
- 'How to Read Church History'** (Vol. 1) by Jean Comby (especially chapter 1, pp 10-17). © Les Éditions du Cerf 1984. Published in Britain by SCM Press ISBN: 0 334 02050 6
- 'SCM Study Guide: Church History'** by Stephen Spencer (especially chapters 2 and 3) . © 2013 Published by SCM Press. ISBN 978 0 334 04645 5.
- SCM Study Guide: New Testament Interpretation'** by Ian Boxall (especially chapter 6) © 2007 and published by SCM Press ISBN 978 0 334 04048 4.
- Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers** translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth © 1968 and 1987 and Published by Penguin (Penguin Classics). ISBN: 978-0-141-91530-2
- 'Christianity: Its Essence and History'** by Hans Küng (especially pages 94 to 110 on Jewish Christianity) translation: John Bowker © SCM Press Ltd. 1995 ISBN 0 334 02584 2. *Appendix B contains a short extract from this section.*
- SCM Study Guide: Early Christian Doctrine'** by Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski (especially chapter 2). © 2010. Published by SCM Press. ISBN 978 0 334 04200 6.
- 'Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity'** by Gerd Theissen (see especially Part 1 chapter iv and Part 3 chapter ix) English Translation by John Bowden © 1978 and published by SCM Press ISBN 0 8006 1330 9.
- 'Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church'** by Rowan Williams Published by Darton Longman and Todd Ltd. ISBN 978 0 232 53032 2

