The historical Jesus as a prophet/healer: A different paradigm

Stevan Davies

ABSTRACT
The conventional paradigm for the historical Jesus has been ‘Jesus the teacher.’ Pointing out the shortcomings of that paradigm and making extensive use of comparative anthropological and psychological research, this study presents the paradigm of ‘Jesus the prophet/healer.’ This incorporates much more of our canonical evidence and provides us with the ability to understand how the life of Jesus led to the rise of the Christian movement. It places the historical Jesus within the context of other prophet/healers in other colonial environments who also gave rise to movements that were initially in pentecostal form. It is suggested that the earliest biographies and histories of Jesus that portray him principally as a prophet/healer and Christianity as a pentecostal cult are better accounts of the historical Jesus than the books of contemporary scholars that insist that Jesus was a social teacher.

1 INTRODUCTION
In my recent book, Jesus the healer: Possession, trance, and the origins of Christianity I tried to show that the historical Jesus and the rise of Christianity must be understood in light of the New Testament’s reports of healings and altered states of consciousness (Davies 1995). In this essay I will outline this paradigm and add nuances and analogies that are not in the book. First, however, I will try and show the reasons for the inadequacy of the present ‘quest for the historical Jesus.’

The standard paradigm throughout the twentieth century has been that of Jesus the teacher. It focuses almost exclusively on the content of Jesus’ sayings and interprets what Jesus did in terms of a pedagogical purpose. For example, Jesus’ exorcisms teach about the presence of the Kingdom of God, Jesus’ actions in the temple teach about the inadequacy and imminent destruction of the temple, Jesus’ propensity to dine with whoever invites him teaches about the openness of the Kingdom of God, and so forth.

Fundamentally, the Jesus the teacher paradigm asserts that if we understand the content and ideology of Jesus’ message to his contemporaries, we will understand what is most essential about him. Further, we will understand why some people were attracted to him and why others were
threatened by him. If, then, we know what Jesus taught we will understand Jesus.

This paradigm has led to a state of chaos in historical Jesus scholarship. We do not know how to find out for certain what Jesus taught, because our sources on the subject vary widely and there is considerable debate even as to what those sources are: shall we include Q, and if so must we distinguish between Q1 and Q2 and Q3? Is the Gospel of Thomas to be included? How about the discourses attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John? For those who agree as to what the sources are, there remains considerable disagreement as to which elements of those sources should be regarded as authentic or inauthentic. Shall we include or exclude Q’s apocalyptic Son of man sayings? Are Jesus’ predictions of his own passion authentic or inauthentic? Should all of the non-synoptic material in Thomas be excluded? If not, how much of it should be?

These problems arise from the fact that our earliest sources are themselves strongly at odds as to what Jesus’ message was. Was Jesus the teacher an apocalyptic prophet, as in Q, or a proto-Gnostic mystic, as in Thomas? Was he a rabbi keeping Torah even more strictly than the Pharisees, as in Matthew, or did he teach about himself as the incarnation of the spirit of God as in John? Were his teachings of no great importance, as Paul’s letters and the Acts of the Apostles indicate? It is certainly odd that a man who is known principally for the content of his teaching left no clear legacy of teaching behind him.

We must measure the results of the paradigm Jesus the teacher against our minimum expectations. After a century of effort have we found what Jesus taught? If not, can we say, more generally, that Jesus was representative of a certain school of thought? Can we see the connection between Jesus’ teachings and the religion that traces its origin to him and thus understand the rise of Christianity? The answer, in all cases, is no.

We do not know what Jesus taught. There is no consensus, even as to which sayings attributed to him are authentic, much less what those sayings individually or collectively mean. When the Jesus Seminar sought to consolidate a consensus, both the scholars who did not participate and the mass media generally raged against the effort as ludicrous and preposterous.

We do not know what particular sort of teacher Jesus was. Scholars of great erudition and experience disagree completely on the subject. Was he a rabbi, as Falk (1985) contends? Or was he a revolutionary who advocated egalitarian peasant societies in opposition to Roman colonialism, as Horsley (1987) believes? Should we follow Mack (1994) and Crossan (1991) in concluding that Jesus was a peasant Jewish cynic sage, or conclude that Sanders (1985) and Fredriksen (1988) are right in maintaining the view of Schweitzer that Jesus principally taught an eschatological lesson?
In all of these cases, except for the idea of Jesus as an eschatological preacher, there is a virtually complete disconnection between Jesus and early Christianity. Jesus the wisdom sage or Jesus the egalitarian revolutionary simply do not explain the rapidly expanding Christian movement in any rational fashion.

I think this leaves us in a hopeless predicament. The best efforts of the scholars of the twentieth century, like the best efforts of the evangelists of the first century, present us with a wide range of diverse theories about the intentions and ideology of Jesus the teacher, all of which are carefully done; but none of which are uniquely compelling. I suggest that we take a different approach entirely and adopt a new paradigm: that of Jesus the prophet/healer.

2 THE CAREER OF A PROPHET/HEALER

Let me outline a scenario concerning the career of a prophet/healer. The cultural context is colonialism. By military force a land is occupied and the indigenous peoples are subordinated. The legitimacy of native elites, laws, and customs is undermined.

Beginning with an overpowering experience that is conceived to be supernatural in origin, a person, usually a man but sometimes a woman, feels himself called to be a prophet of God, to speak on behalf of God and to heal the sick. His powers of healing are demonstrated and considerable numbers of people come to be healed. Some of them form an entourage closely affiliated with the prophet/healer.

The prophet/healer, often without intending to do so, forms a locus of popularly attested power and authority. He is understood sometimes to be revitalising the cultural forms of the colonized people. He is arrested, imprisoned, exiled, or executed although he usually had no strong political intentions (Turner 1979:18, 133-144).

After his death some of his adherents follow his brother or his son, others follow individuals from his entourage who are credited with being prophet/healers in their own right. The cults that arise feature dissociative religious phenomena such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and supernatural healing. In keeping with common Christian vocabulary I call such phenomena 'Pentecostal.' These kinds of cults are fissiparous, very prone to split into other cults, and within a generation or two, a whole variety of cults may come into existence which base their myths of origin on the activities of the original prophet/healer, whose role is considered to be unique. Leaders following after him usually do not claim to have replaced him but to be mediators between him and the people.
These cults provide leadership opportunities for oppressed people, and provide a sense of community where it has declined in its traditional forms through the effects of colonisation and urbanisation (Barrett 1968; Gager 1975:108). Such cults tend to find legitimacy by appealing to the scriptures of the Old Testament, identifying themselves with the True Judaism. They often couple this with vehement condemnation of the magical healing techniques of their own cultures. This is true now, in our era, and it seems to have been true in the first century as well.

From the activities of one charismatic healer believed by his followers to be a prophet of God arise a series of cults featuring pentecostal activities. I call this a prophet/healer-pentecostal system.

We can see this system in the recent activities of the originators of African Initiated Churches. For example, Simon Kimbangu of Zaire, originator of The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth Through Simon Kimbangu was thought to be a messenger of God and his cult arose from mass belief in his power to heal; today the membership in pentecostal Kimbanguist churches numbers in the millions (Ndiokwere 1981:46-55). Isaiah Shembe of South Africa, originator of ama-Nazaretha, which are churches that appeal principally to Zulu people, was a prophet and a healer; after his death members of ama-Nazaretha increasingly began to behave in a pentecostal fashion; believing themselves possessed by the Holy Spirit. Sundkler seems inadvertently to be quoting from the gospels when he describes Shembe: ‘He now went from place to place in Natal, preaching and driving out demons, guided by the Holy Spirit’ (Sundkler 1961:110). John Alexander Dowie of Illinois was a faith healer in America at the beginning of this century (Mahon 1986). His movement, the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, sent missionaries to South Africa nearly a century ago and attracted some converts through their claims to be able to heal spiritually. Those converts quickly were converted also to Pentecostal Christianity, again by missionaries, and from this origin hundreds of small pentecostal healing churches have arisen throughout South Africa (Hollenweger 1972). Other, more well known, prophet/healers are Joseph Smith of New York, originator of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; and Jesus Bar-Joseph of Galilee, originator of the various Christian churches known to us through the New Testament.

---

1 Pentecostalism as a contemporary form of Christianity is itself an African Initiated Church, if we expand the term to include African Americans. Its origin is usually traced to the Azusa Street Revival led by a black minister named W. J. Seymore. Pentecostalism's roots go back to the Holiness movement and further back to early Methodism (Synan 1971).
In none of these instances would it be helpful to define the individuals in question principally as teachers. What counted most was their supposed prophetic status and their ability to heal supernaturally.

In anthropological studies, the originators of African Initiated Churches are sometimes called 'prophet/healers.' The same terminology is not used for Jesus by New Testament scholars, but it could be. It combines two New Testament themes that virtually every scholar would agree are historically reliable. For example, Boring (1991:57) wrote 'the New Testament’s picture of Jesus as prophet is historical bedrock.' Meier (1986:1321) acknowledged that 'nothing is more certain about Jesus than that he was viewed by his contemporaries as an exorcist and a healer.' The assertion that Jesus was a prophet/healer is completely in accord with New Testament accounts of his life. Was he then a prophet/healer whose activities lead to a proliferation of 'pentecostal' cults through the agency of successor prophet/healers? The Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters both describe this phenomenon. Furthermore, as everyone knows, Christianity arose in a colonial environment, due to Roman imperial conquest, and Christianity spread principally among the urban poor and among pagans; many of the same factors existed in twentieth century Africa and so, although no historical analogies are ever exact, a general understanding of the rise of African Initiated Churches might help us to understand the rise of first century Christianity.

3 JESUS AS A SPIRIT-POSSESSED HEALER

In my book Jesus the healer I sought to understand Jesus as a specific type of prophet/healer, one who was spirit-possessed. Spirit-possession involves the substitution of an altered form of consciousness for an individual’s normal form of consciousness. The consequence is that the identity of the individual

---

2 Turner (1979:98) writes that in the opinion of most prophet/healer churches, 'the Godhead is envisaged as present and powerful through the Holy Spirit, who reveals the will of God and the destiny of the individual, guides through dangers, and fills men with new powers of prophecy, utterance, prayer and healing. The (originating) prophet has these charismata in a special degree, but many others may share in them both through his ministry and by their own experience of the Spirit.' These words might also serve as a summary of the opinion of the author of Luke-Acts about the role of the spirit in the rise of Christianity. While it is certainly true that leaders of prophet/healer churches have read Luke-Acts, the existence of churches throughout the world whose leaders have read Luke-Acts and yet do not hold the same view of the present activity of the Holy Spirit shows that one cannot adduce reading Luke-Acts as a principal causal factor in the establishment of such a prophet/healer churches! New Testament accounts of pentecostal phenomena are more probably a means to legitimize existing practice rather than a cause of such practices.
is believed to have been replaced with the consciousness and identity of a possessing spirit. Accordingly, the social roles and expectations of the individual are replaced by social roles and expectations appropriate to the possessing spirit.

We can find a very good description of spirit-possession in a passage written by Philo Judaeus, a contemporary of Jesus. Philo writes that:

"So long as our own mind, pouring as it were noonday light into the whole soul, shines about us and encompasses us, we are in ourselves and are not possessed. But when this light reaches its setting then, as might be expected, ecstasy and divine possession and madness fall upon us. For when the divine light shines, the human sets, and when it sets, then the other rises and shines. And this is wont to happen to the prophetic kind. The mind that is in us is banished at the coming of the divine spirit, and at its departure returns home (QuisRer 264-66, Dodd 1953:191)."

The anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1973:9-24) surveyed 488 cultures that have been examined in some detail, and concluded that in 90 percent of those cultures, forms of religious trance and/or religious possession took place with some regularity. 'Trance' states are altered states of consciousness achieved deliberately and interpreted to have religious significance but which are not accompanied by any belief in possessing spirits. Bourguignon discovered that 437 of the 488 separate societies she surveyed had belief in trance, or possession trance, or both. Trance experiences alone were found in 186, or 38 percent; both trance and possession trance in 116, or 24 percent; possession trance, which I term spirit or demon possession, in 251 or 52 percent. Her data demonstrate that religiously defined altered states of consciousness, specifically possession trance, are to be found in essentially all areas of the world and within essentially all types and developmental stages of human society.

Winkelman (1992) has recently analysed the techniques of religious healing in forty seven premodern cultures and concluded that there are five types of healer: the shaman, the healer, the priest, the sorcerer and the medium.

It appears to me that the career of Jesus as reported in the New Testament fits very well with his category of the medium; but I do not like the connotations of that term and prefer to call the medium a spirit-possessed healer. Here is an abbreviated version of Winkelman’s commentary on the role and nature of the spirit possessed healer in premodern societies.

---

3 Cf also Mk 13:11: '[When they lead you away and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that time.] It will not be you who speak but the holy spirit' and 2 Pt 1:21: 'No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'.
The primary activities of the Mediums are healing and divination [prophecy]; they also provide protection against [demons] and malevolent magical practitioners. Divination is accomplished through the use of an Altered State of Consciousness.

Relations with spirits is the primary source of their power for these practitioners. The Mediums are associated with superior spirits and gods, and generally did not have evidence of an impersonal source of power. The Medium's power is thought to be based in spirits, who are thought to possess the Medium and act independently of the Medium's control, and occasionally without the Medium's awareness.

Mediums are predominantly women and are generally of low social and economic status. Although there are a few societies in which practitioners of this type are largely male, they are generally found in this role infrequently. The Mediums are generally evaluated by the members of their culture as being exclusively moral and benevolent in their activities, and generally not associated with the negative use of magical power for harm of others.

Mediums are generally part-time practitioners, engaging in normal subsistence activities in addition to their activities as practitioners. Mediums frequently do not receive remuneration for their professional activities. There is little specialisation among the Mediums.

Mediums are selected for their roles through spontaneous spirit-possession experiences which involve culturally defined episodes of possession by spirits in which the personality of the practitioner is believed to be replaced by that of a spirit entity.

The Medium's activities are generally carried out at the request of a client group; their activities may occur in the setting of the client's family group, or may be public ceremonies in which the practitioner's activities are observed or participated in by the local community.

Generally the Mediums do not use magical technique, but instead rely upon their propitiation and an Altered State of Consciousness relationship with spirits, as a means of manipulating the supernatural.

I think it is pretty clear from New Testament evidence that Jesus of Nazareth fits into the category of 'spirit possessed healer' or 'medium' as Winkelman defines it. In turn, the fact that Jesus' activities can be categorised in this way lends credence to the evangelists' reports.

According to Mark, Jesus' family are reported to have believed that Jesus was 'outside himself,' (3:21). In the context of that culture this is not just an example of the phrase we use for insanity 'he is out of his mind,' it is an example of a possession paradigm that assumes: given Jesus is out of his mind, another entity is in his mind. He is, in other words, not himself but another. He is possessed. Having reported Jesus' family's opinion that he is outside himself, Mark moves to offer explanations of what entity is inside him: 'the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons”' (3:22). Immediately Jesus responds, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' (3:23) and seemingly con-
cedes that while he exorcises through a possessing entity, it is not Satan. He says, consistently with this, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin;" for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit" (3:28-30).

According to Mark it is not the case that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul, Satan, or any other unclean spirit. Rather, it is the case that Jesus was possessed by the Holy Spirit; to deny this and offer instead the demon-possession hypothesis is an unforgiveable sin. Almost immediately after the baptism sequence (1:1-13) Mark informs us that those who were demon possessed knew Jesus' true or alternate identity (1:21-28). He is 'the Holy one of God' or 'the Son of God' and in accordance with the messianic secret motif Mark tells us that Jesus would not let the demons speak because they knew who he truly was (1:34, 3:11-12). Mark seems to be telling us that those who are possessed by unclean spirits have supernatural insight into the identity of a person who is possessed by a holy spirit.4

Mark's view of Jesus as a spirit-possessed healer and exorcist is not the view he wrote his gospel to affirm. Rather it is a view that has been passed down to him which he accepts, but which he takes pains to indicate should not predominate over his own, chronologically later, view of Jesus the suffering, dying, and rising son of man.

The question of Jesus' identity also occurs in the Gospel of John where 'the Judeans' say to him, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, "I have come down from heaven?"' (Jn 6:42). And here, as we see ubiquitously in the Gospel of John, unless one understands that Jesus is not the persona Jesus of Nazareth but the spirit of God come down from heaven, one fails to understand the situation at all.

John, like Mark, believes that people would have assumed that if Jesus is possessed he is demon-possessed:

Jesus said, "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed by a demon?" Jesus answered, "I am not possessed by a demon but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me" (Jn 8:47-49).

And also, 'Many of them said, "He is demon possessed and he is mad; why listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a

---

4 The converse would be true too. For example, Paul (1 Cor 12:10) tells us that some who receive the Holy Spirit have the gift of discernment so that they can tell who has which kind of spirit.
demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (Jn 10:20-21). As in Mark, here too we find the question of possession coupled with the question of how it was that Jesus had power to heal. To understand Jesus’ words is to understand that it was not a human being who spoke but the spirit of God. Those who do not hear the spirit of God speak, and so hear the words of God, might well define an alter-persona differently, as a demon speaking. Such people would accept the possession paradigm but interpret it as Mark’s scribes do who came down from Jerusalem declaring that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul.

The evangelists do not frequently make the forthright claim that Jesus was possessed by the spirit of God. Instead, they use, or imply, the story of Jesus’ reception of the spirit during his baptismal experience as the prolegomenon to all that follows. And so, they do not often reiterate what has already been established. Rather, they proceed to report on the consequences of the baptismal experience. What Jesus of Nazareth formerly could not do, the spirit of God subsequently could do. And what the spirit of God did, acting through Jesus’ body, is some of what the historical Jesus did. Or so he and those associated with him believed.

Jesus was baptised under circumstances where psychological change, metanoia (or, repentance), was a sine qua non for attendance. John, perhaps, announced that the repentant would someday receive the spirit. The reports that Jesus, under such circumstances, entered into a state which he came to define as possession by God’s spirit, are good reliable accounts. The reason the story is told as ‘the beginning of the gospel...’ is that the story of Jesus for formative Christianity was the story of a spirit-possessed man whose new social role resulted from that specific status.

One might ask what does all of this have to do with Jesus as a healer and exorcist? I think there is general agreement that faith healing can work very effectively if those who come to a healer have faith in his powers. I spend a considerable amount of time discussing this process in my book, but it is really not at all complicated. Any claim that Jesus could heal and exorcise begs the question of why people would think he could do these things. It should be clear by now that my answer will be that Jesus was credited with the power of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, he could be credited with the power to forgive sins and so to alleviate the consequences of sins which were conceived at that time to include paralysis, blindness, fever, and so on. Further, the power of the Holy Spirit was considered stronger than the powers of unclean spirits, and so a spirit possessed healer could be an exorcist practically by definition. In my opinion, to say that Jesus was a spirit-possessed prophet/healer whose initial experience occurred during his baptism by John is nothing more than a general paraphrase of the canonical Gospels.
If we understand Jesus to have been a spirit-possessed prophet/healer, then it may be that some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in John’s gospel should be regarded as historically authentic. As the sayings of Mohammed when inspired by God were recorded in the Quran, and the sayings of Mohammed himself were separately recorded in the Hadith, so Jesus’ sayings in the voice of the spirit may have been recorded separately from the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth himself. The latter we find in the synoptics and in Thomas, the former, perhaps, in the Gospel of John.

While in an altered state of consciousness Jesus certainly said some things that were to be attributed not to him but to the spirit speaking through him. The Jewish prophetic paradigm demands this. His sayings in the synoptic style, proverbs and parables, responses to arguments and to questions, show little sign of having been uttered by a person in an altered state of consciousness. The synoptic style sayings that scholarship has concluded derive from Jesus were, I presume, spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. What then might Jesus, possessed by God’s spirit, have said?

4 JESUS AS A SPIRIT-POSSESSED SPEAKER

Perhaps we can identify some sayings that may have been spoken by Jesus when he was in a state of spirit-possession, sayings that refer to the spirit’s nature and origin, the spirit’s powers and relationship to God. The following may be examples; all are taken from the Gospel of John. The attribution I give them derives from the thesis that Jesus’ identity was conceived at times during his life to be the spirit of God.

8:23 The spirit of God said, ‘You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.’

6:38 The spirit of God said, ‘I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.’

3:34 He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit.’

9:5 The spirit of God said, ‘As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’

10:30 The spirit of God said, ‘I and the Father are one.’

14:6 The spirit of God said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.’

16:28 The spirit of God said, ‘I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father.’

Each of these sayings, when attributed to God’s Holy Spirit, would be little more than Jewish common sense. Of course the spirit of God and God are one; of course the spirit of God comes from God; of course the spirit of God does the will of God; of course the spirit of God is not of this world; of
course the spirit of God is the light of the world, the way to God, the truth, and the life. We might hear the spirit of God speaking in these sayings and, if the spirit of God spoke, it spoke through a human voice, through the voice of a person possessed by God’s spirit. Jesus was one such person.

If Jesus supposedly became possessed by God’s spirit at the time of his baptism, then an understanding of the historical Jesus, from psychological and anthropological considerations, and from the theory of possession attested in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian sources, must take the following into account:

* He had a second persona different from the persona ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’
* That second persona had a supernatural name or label different than ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’
* That second persona spoke in a manner different than ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’

If Jesus had a second persona different from that of ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ how did anyone know this? They could only have known it if the second persona told them about it; this is what normally happens in conversation between a spirit-possessed persona and an audience: the spirit announces its presence by speech.

The fundamental characteristics of the spirit of God when present in a human body are, at the minimum, these:

* The spirit of God comes from God.
* The spirit of God knows things of God.
* The spirit of God reveals what God wishes to have revealed.
* The spirit of God speaks the words of God.
* The spirit of God returns to God.

Its ‘coming and returning’ are the way the ‘arising and ceasing’ of an alternate persona possession-state will be described given the assumption that the spirit is an external entity.

Was it or was it not the case that Jesus referred to himself, or rather the spirit referred to itself, as ‘the Son?’ Q attributes the usage of ‘the Son’ to Jesus as a self-reference in a passage beginning, ‘He rejoiced in the Spirit and said...’ (Q Luke 10:21-22). This passage does not definitively say, but may say (it is certainly an odd usage), that the speech following is to be attributed to Jesus’ alter-persona the spirit. According to Hill (1979:59), ‘The unparalleled statement in Luke 10:21 that Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” must mean that the evangelist regarded the sayings which follow as an inspired or even ecstatic prophecy of peculiar significance.’ In the sayings that follow we are told ‘All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ This saying is particularly important as evidence that revelatory discourse attributed to Jesus as the Son
is not unique to John’s gospel and is attested in an early stage of the sayings tradition.

It can be argued (cf Boring 1991:77-79) that some Pauline Christians and some Johannine Christians were prophets who spoke in the spirit and so in the voice of the Son; that is also a point made in Gal 4:6-7 and Rm 8:15-16. Where did they get the idea that this is an appropriate thing for a spirit-possessed follower of Jesus to do? Most probably these trajectories trace back to Jesus himself, originating when he heard a supernatural voice at his baptism, one that proclaimed him the Son during his first experience of the spirit.

The most economic explanation for the practice of labeling the spirit as ‘Son’ is that Jesus initiated the practice of doing so just as our evidence says or implies that he did. If we substitute Son for ‘I’ in five presumably unquestionable assertions the spirit of God might make to identify itself and substitute the word Father for God, we have:

1. The Son comes from the Father.
2. The Son knows things of the Father.
3. The Son reveals what the Father wishes to have revealed.
4. The Son speaks the words of the Father.
5. The Son will return to the Father.

These are the fundamental principles reiterated by the Johannine sayings as well as Lk 10:22 // Mt 11:27. To progress from Jesus of Nazareth, who comes to be baptised repenting his sins, to ‘I come from the Father, I will return to the Father,’ one need only acknowledge the historicity of these things:

1. Jesus received the spirit of God at his baptism (understood through the anthropology and psychology of spirit-possession).
2. Subsequently Jesus sometimes spoke in the identity of the spirit.
3. The spirit would have had to identify itself, its origin, and its nature to any new audience and the itinerancy of Jesus meant that such self-identification would have had to be done repeatedly.
4. Jesus labeled God ‘Father.’
5. Jesus labeled God’s spirit ‘Son’ (or, more precisely, he labeled his alter-persona, identified as spirit, ‘Son’).

Accordingly, when Jesus ‘rejoiced in the spirit’ or, to put it more mundanely, spoke in the voice of the spirit, he may well have spoken in the fashion known to us through sayings preserved for the most part in the Gospel of John. He certainly spoke in some fashion or other that was distinguishable from his standard modes of speech. The paradigm of Jesus the prophet/healer does not prove that Jesus said some of the things attributed to him in John’s gospel, but it makes that proposition a reasonable one. It does
not have to be the case that John's gospel and other texts make the claim that Jesus was considered to have been Son of God only because of later first century christological speculations. It is entirely possible that he was considered Son of God during his lifetime as our sources in fact say he was.

I would like to suggest certain principles:

First: Pneumatology arises from the attempt to account supernaturally for altered states of consciousness.

Second: Christology arose from Pneumatology. An understanding of the nature of a spirit will precede an understanding of a person possessed by that spirit.

Third: The experiences giving rise to both Pneumatology and Christology can be understood through anthropological and psychological analysis. This means that Pneumatology and Christology are not subjects to be left completely in the realm of theology. They too can be the subject of discussion for secular scholarship and they can be, and must be, considered relevant to accounts of the life of the secular historical Jesus.

5 THE ORIGINATION AND SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

To conceive of Jesus as a prophet/healer permits us to do something else that is interesting, it allows us to understand how it was that the activities and status of the historical Jesus led to the rapid rise and spread of Christianity in the mid-first century.

It is an historical certainty that the first Christians formed a cult oriented to experiences of the spirit. In the words of C K Barrett (1947:1), 'No more certain statement can be made about the Christians of the first generation than this: they believed themselves to be living under the immediate government of the Spirit of God.' What occurred to Jesus' followers after his death is predictable and explicable. Under conditions of social stress arising from factors both external to and internal to their social group, these people spontaneously experienced altered states of consciousness that they attributed to the spirit. They began to function as a missionary pentecostal cult, requiring members to exhibit dissociation-based experiences such as prophecying and speaking in tongues. We can also see examples of this sort of thing in the histories of African Initiated Churches and in the histories of Pentecostal movements in the United States.

Several words of explanation are necessary here. The general psychological rubric for discussion of such phenomena as possession, glossolalia, prophecy and so on is 'dissociation,' meaning that one element of a person's mind is severed from the whole. In some cases a faculty of mobility or perception is severed through conversion-disorder so that a person becomes
blind or paralysed. In some cases dissociation may result in two or more separate ego-identities, which anthropology calls spirit-possession. In other cases a voice is heard, or speech functions are initiated, that the individual finds to be severed from his or her conscious functioning. In religious contexts that voice is said to be prophetic, those speech functions are said to be 'speaking in tongues.' Yet the individual's own ego-consciousness remains intact.

The New Testament story is a story of varying dissociative states featuring the transformation of persons from one state to another. The following historical outline may serve as a framework for understanding the rise of Christianity.

(i) There were people in Palestine with dissociative conversion disorders which they attributed to sin, and ego-identity dissociative disorders which they attributed to demon-possession.

(ii) Jesus experienced ego-identity dissociation that he came to attribute to spirit-possession. Those who agreed with this attribution would have labeled him a prophet, those who disagreed would label him demon-possessed.

(iii) Insofar as the spirit of God was thought able to forgive sins and to have the ability to overpower demons, Jesus would have been credited with power to heal. The reports of the kinds of healing he did principally seem to be dissociative disorders, but faith in a faith healer can result in cures of many different types; in fact once a healer's reputation is established, virtually any time a follower recovers from an ailment the healer is likely to be credited with the cure.

(iv) It seems likely that many of those who went with Jesus as his followers were among those who previously came to him to be healed. Accordingly, it is likely that many of those people had formerly experienced dissociation, Luke 8:1-3 gives some evidence for this.

(v) Reports in John’s Gospel and Acts, backed up by evidence in Paul’s letters, tell us that within days of Jesus’ death his followers spontaneously experienced the spirit, manifested mainly in glossolalia and prophecy.

(vi) For a generation or two Christian pentecostal cults spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire for reasons analogous to the rapid spread of Christian pentecostal cults in modern Africa.

(vii) As the movement entered a later generation, as the initial members died off and their children entered the cults without any prior spirit experience, as members of the cult achieved higher real social status due largely to the mutual assistance and moral discipline encouraged by cult mores, cults became less and less oriented to pentecostal experience, as has happened time and time again throughout Christian history.
While Jesus certainly said things, held opinions, and offered advice during his lifetime, only after the age of pentecostalism began to turn into the age of institutionalised Christianity did the idea arise that it was crucial to know what Jesus taught. At this time, perhaps forty years after Jesus’ death, people began to write lists of sayings, and shortly thereafter narratives, designed to convey his teachings. But the decontextualised sayings in oral tradition had to be constructed into coherent systems by whomever it was who was writing. And so we have Jesus the wisdom sage in Thomas, Jesus the eschatological prophet in Q. Then we find Mark making narratives out of the sayings to produce a gospel about the suffering Son of man. Later still Matthew tells us about Jesus who was a pharasaic rabbi. The desire to construct systematic meaning out of decontextualised sayings traditions continues on to this day in the writings of Crossan, Sanders, Fredricksen, Mack and others.

The hypothesis that Jesus was a spirit-possessed prophet/healer who gave rise to a series of pentecostal cults is one that seems to me to be in accord with the testimony of the canonical scriptures. It is also in accord with what we know about pentecostal cults today throughout the world, particularly in the United States and in South Africa.

Let us assume a population that is socially subordinated and whose traditional social structures have come under attack. Colonialism can account for this, but other causal factors can exist. And let us assume that this population is in need of medical assistance and yet traditional medical procedures are not found to be adequate. For such people a pentecostal cult offers the following:

* A local founder/leader with supernaturally attested charisma.
* A community of mutual assistance that may have local centers in many places.
* Altered states of consciousness that are understood as deriving from the holy spirit and which are self-validating, pleasurable, and status-generating within the group.
* Supernaturally guaranteed forms of healing.
* The ability to incorporate favorite elements from previous belief systems into the cult’s belief systems.
* A variety of leadership roles and, sometimes, supernatural identities. Individuals with little or no chance to achieve social status outside the cult may achieve very high social status within the cult.

---

5 The chaotic state of religious identities in the ‘burned-over district’ of upstate New York in the early nineteenth century is commonly said to have a causal relationship to the origin of Mormonism.
An ideology of egalitarianism such that any person exhibiting behaviors attributed to the action of the holy spirit is doing so on an equal status with any other such person whether slave or free, male or female, Jew or gentile, black or white.

A pentecostal cult requires religious legitimisation. Today such cults legitimise themselves in reference to the Christian religion. In the colonial environment of the first century Mediterranean Christian cults sought legitimisation from Judaism. I believe that there are several reasons for this.

The religion of the colonisers was itself tribal; Roman religion was for Romans and, at most, could be practiced by local elites as a means to affirm political loyalty. Mass conversion to Roman religion was not an option.

Judaism was a *religio licitas* enjoying legal exemptions in many regions so that Jews could follow Torah. Implicitly Judaism had a relatively high status in the eyes of the colonial power.

Judaism had ancient written authoritative scriptures that could be appropriated in the vernacular (Greek) and utilised to construct systems extrinsic to Judaism itself. Those scriptures legitimised prophetic experiences.

Judaism offered a system of taboos and puritanical ethics, elements that are correlated with pentecostal cults.

Finally, Judaism had a network of social centers called synagogues that encouraged community solidarity. Competing religious systems such as the mystery cults had nothing similar to offer.

As pentecostal cults in Africa and America legitimise themselves today as reformations of Christianity, so the Christian cults that arose in the mid-first-century legitimised themselves as reformations of Judaism. As missionary pentecostalism in Africa earlier in this century tended to assume an egalitarianism of the spirit that would allow indigenous Africans positions of church leadership, or at least admission to church services, so the Christian movement of the first century found that the egalitarianism of the spirit should, and did, lead to the admission of gentiles into its forms of Judaism.

The role of the cult's originator seems to be fairly standard. During his lifetime he is accredited with a unique relationship with God so that he can heal the sick and speak authoritatively and prophetically. He may or may not be thought to be possessed, or to exhibit pentecostal behaviors, but a perceived ability to heal does seem to be normative. After the originator's death he maintains his unique position and so, in one sense or another, most originators are conceived to have come back to life. Originators continue to be thought of as mediators between God and the people of the ongoing cult. Today Jesus Christ is conceived to be God in the trinitarian sense and so
today's originators are generally not thought to be Jesus Christ but to mediate between the people and Christ. In the first century, however, Jesus was the originator of the Christian pentecostal cults, a prophet/healer considered to have been possessed by God's spirit. He was thought to have come back to life and to mediate between God and the Christian people.

I would say that while some might prefer to find Jesus to have been like Martin Luther King or Gandhi, he seems to have been more like Isaiah Shembe or Simon Kimbangu; and while some might prefer to think his activities gave rise to churches like the Reformed or Anglican churches, the first churches seem seem to have been more akin to the recently arisen pentecostal American Vineyard churches, or the South African Apostolic Zionist churches.

6 CONCLUSION

I think we should turn away from the paradigm 'Jesus the teacher' toward a paradigm of 'Jesus the prophet/healer.' This paradigm allows much more of our canonical evidence to speak than does the attempt to isolate authentic sayings. It gives us the ability to understand how the life of Jesus led to the rise of the Christian movement. Finally, it places the historical Jesus within a larger historical context, into the context of other prophet/healers in other colonial environments who also gave rise to other movements that were initially in pentecostal form. Might it be that the earliest biographies and histories of Jesus that portray him principally as a prophet/healer and Christianity as a pentecostal cult are better accounts of the secular historical Jesus than the books of contemporary scholars that insist that Jesus was a social teacher?

While my own study has been done principally through the use of anthropological and psychological theory, I do believe that it has profound implications for Christian theology. But I am not myself a theologian. Therefore, let me close with a quotation from the great Pastroistics scholar and theologian Geoffrey Lampe (1972:117):

The category of Spirit-possession was used to some extent in early Christian thought to interpret not only Christ's present relationship to believers but also his relationship to God. If believers are sons of God through the indwelling of God's Spirit, possessing their souls and reshaping their lives according to the pattern of Christ, can Christ's own sonship be interpreted in the same terms? The gospels suggest this possibility. In the synoptists Spirit-possession and messianic sonship are linked together in the narrative of Christ's baptism. The Spirit descends upon him and he receives the divine assurance that he is Son of God.
WORKS CONSULTED


Prof S Davies, Religious Studies, College Misericordia, 301 Lake Street, Dallas, Pennsylvania 18612-1098, USA. Guest Lecturer, Department of New Testament, Unisa, P O Box 392, Pretoria, 0003 South Africa.