

Early Tradition About Jesus

from Marcus J. Borg *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*. NY: Harper One, 2012. (pg. 11).

"Before we turn to Paul's letters, it is important and helpful to provide a concise summary of what is likely to be very early tradition about Jesus, already there by the time of Paul and from which Paul himself would have learned. The following are likely to be components of the early communities' historical memory of Jesus:

- Jesus was born shortly before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE and grew up in Nazareth, a peasant village in Galilee, in the northern part of the Jewish homeland.
- In his mid to late twenties, he went to a wilderness prophet known as John, who became his mentor. Presumably after some time (rather than immediately), he was baptized by John. After John was arrested by the ruler of Galilee, Jesus began his own public ministry.
- At the center of Jesus's message was the kingdom of God. His first words in Mark, our earliest gospel, are about the coming of the kingdom of God. They are Mark's advance summary of what Jesus and his story are about.
- The kingdom of God was not about "heaven," but about the transformation of this world, the earth, which is clear from the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come *on earth*."
- He spoke primarily to the peasant class (90 percent of the population), which was made up of agricultural and manual laborers who lived in rural areas: small towns, villages, hamlets, the countryside. He didn't go to cities, except Jerusalem.
- As a teacher he consistently used arresting aphorisms and provocative parables to invite his hearers to image reality, life, and their lives differently.
- He was a healer and an exorcist. More stories of healings and exorcisms are told about him than about any other figure in the Jewish tradition.
- He broke social boundaries. He was known and criticized for eating with marginalized people, including virtual outcasts and untouchables, and for his associations with women.
- His followers spoke of him as "anointed by the Spirit." The Spirit of God was present in him and flowed through him.
- He went to Jerusalem at the season of Passover, most likely in the year 30. His last week was filled with confrontation and conflict, leading to arrest and execution by the imperial and religious authorities who ruled his world.
- Some of his followers experienced him after his death—not simply as a "ghost," but as a divine reality with the qualities of "Lord" and "God."

Details could be added to this list, but its purpose is not to provide an in-depth account of the historical pre-Easter Jesus. That would require a book-length treatment, and a multitude of books have been written that do just that. Rather, its purpose is twofold. It presents a scholarly consensus; most mainline scholars would agree that at least this much is early historical memory. And it is a crystallization of what Paul is likely to have known about Jesus. He may well have known more, but he knew at least this much.