

THE WAY

The Religion of Jesus *Before* Christianity

J. G. Johnston

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2nd expanded edition, June 2023

Cover Design: L. A. Johnston

ISBN: 978-0-9979700-2-9

MSE Press

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book merges first-hand accounts written by others about the life and religion of Jesus. The four New Testament Gospels provide much of the content. Where the Gospels have been quoted, restated, or used as a source, they are footnoted in the text. The comprehensive and precise account of Jesus' life found in the Urantia Papers, "The Life and Teachings of Jesus," enabled a chronological ordering for the Gospels.¹ It also provided important additional content and details not found in the four Gospels.

¹ *The Urantia Book*

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

This question—“Who do you say that I am?”—posed by Jesus to his disciples over two thousand years ago, is as relevant today as it was then. When we listen to Jesus in the four Gospels, we hear him refer to himself as “The Bread of Life,” “The Way the Truth and the Life,” “The Good Shepherd,” “The Resurrection and the Life,” “The True Vine” and “The Light of the World,” but *never* as “The Lamb of God”—a sacrifice required to atone for the sins of the world. Yet, Jesus as the sacrificial “Lamb of God” evolved as a centerpiece of institutional Christianity.

While his submission to a cruel death was surely a testament to his gracious love and resolute commitment, the *truth* he came to deliver was in his *life*—how he lived and what he taught. His earliest followers called his simple religion, “The Way.” His religion was unencumbered by the creeds, rituals, and rules of institutional religion. Through his parables, his discourses, and his abounding love, he revealed a new bold way of life born from the *unconditional* love of his Father and ours.

My intent in assembling, adapting, and connecting the first-hand accounts written by others was to convey the *original* religion of Jesus and how he lived it, to illuminate what he taught and to portray his attentive and unselfishly compassionate way of life.

This story is for anyone, of any religion or background. In learning about his life and teaching, we gain more abundant access to divine love and the spiritual resources readily available to us all.

J. G. Johnston, 2023

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him . . . he gave the right to become children of God, born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of a man's will, but born of God.

—Apostle John Zebedee



MAP OF FIRST CENTURY PALESTINE



PROLOGUE

2000 BC

IN A SMALL NOMADIC community northwest of the Dead Sea, one individual arrived to prepare the world for the birth of Jesus. His contemporary, Abraham, called him “Lord”; the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of him reverently; the Book of Genesis refers to him as “a priest of God Most High”; a New Testament writer says that he is “like the Son of God”; a street in Jerusalem still marks his name: Melchizedek.

About Melchizedek we have much to say, much that is difficult to explain now that you have grown so dull of hearing. For indeed, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to

teach you the ABC of God's oracles over again; it has come to this, that you need milk instead of solid food. Melchizedek has no father, no mother, no lineage; his years have no beginning, his life no end. He is like the Son of God: he remains a priest for all time. Consider how great he must be for Abraham the patriarch to give him a tithe of the finest of the spoil.²

The truth about God had become confused and hazy since the age when, the Book of Genesis tells us, "the sons of God had intercourse with the daughters of men and got children by them."³ With the planned arrival here of a Divine Son, Melchizedek came well in advance to prepare the world for him, and to reestablish a religious faith in One God.

He was first observed by mortal man on that eventful day when he entered the tent of Amadon, a Chaldean herder of Sumerian extraction, and said, "I am Melchizedek priest of El Elyon, the Most High, the one and only God."

Within a few years, Melchizedek had gathered around himself a group of pupils and believers who formed the nucleus of a community. He was soon known throughout the region as the priest of El Elyon, the Most High, and the sage of Salem. His teaching community called "Salem," meaning "peace," would later become a settlement renamed "Jesub," and much later, a city called "Jerusalem."

He prohibited the long-standing primitive ritual of slaughtering animals as sacrifice. He told his followers that another Son of God would someday be born into the world. With one of his leading disciples, Abraham, he made a solemn covenant: "Look to the heavens and number the stars if you are able; so numerous shall your seed be."⁴

And thus did Melchizedek prepare the way and set the monotheistic stage for the bestowal of a Divine Son of the One God. *Faith*, he taught, was the only requirement for acceptance by God.

² Hebrews 5:11,12; 7:3,4

³ Genesis 6:4

⁴ Genesis 15:5

Rumors about Melchizedek spread rapidly among the many nomadic tribes. He attracted many more early disciples. He taught these new disciples according to their capacities to grasp his teaching. To some, he taught more than others; but to all, he emphasized the central theme of his teaching: *Gain eternal life through faith in God.*

During his nearly one hundred years in the flesh, Melchizedek trained and sent out waves of missionaries to remote parts of the world. They carried wide and far his revelations about God and the cosmos. Many modern ideas about heaven, angels, God, and the trinity originated with Melchizedek.

The first of Melchizedek's missionaries—men and women—were sent to the nearby regions of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor. Later, other missionaries traveled further, establishing teaching centers across the continents of Asia and Europe.

The descendants of these missionaries in Mesopotamia privately kept their religion alive, inscribing much of their religious teaching on clay and stone tablets. The Book of Job and many of the Psalms were derived from these tablets, discovered in Babylon by the later-exiled Jews.

Aware of their lineage from the early “sons of God,” the Egyptians readily accepted the teaching of the missionaries. Much of the Book of Proverbs was written in Egypt after the arrival of the Salem missionaries. The pharaoh Ikhnaton later subscribed to the Melchizedek doctrines and attempted to convert the entire country to a monotheistic religion, but his short life was an insufficient foundation for his large agenda. Twelve of Ikhnaton's hymns are still preserved in the Book of Psalms.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt had few meaningful ideas about religion and no formal organization. Moses held this polyglot mass of people together with the laws of a fearsome God, a revised version of the Melchizedek doctrines, necessary to mold an unruly people.

The seeds of Melchizedek's revelations were planted across Eurasia—from the British Isles to Japan. That seed nearly withered as the centuries wore on, but it was revived in a global renaissance in about the sixth century BC. A remarkable array of teachers, among them Lao Tse, Confucius, Siddhartha, Zoroaster, Hebrew prophets, and pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, reawakened and elevated spiritual consciousness. The traditions and teaching of these enlightened

teachers would form an international foundation for the bold new religion that Jesus would deliver just a few centuries later.

From Greek philosophy in the West to Taoism in the East, an enlightenment in many ways compatible with Melchizedek's original revelation settled into contemporary life in many cultures. The Eurasian stage was set for a new revelation of God to the world.

Though the light of truth found its home in diverse cultures and languages, the descendants of Abraham tenaciously adhered to Melchizedek's teaching about one God. The Hebrews, who with Moses, had escaped Egyptian enslavement, found their way into the "promised land." The substance of their religion ebbed and flowed, sometimes corralled by a priestly class, at other times liberated by audacious prophets. They entered many dark periods that put the Salem doctrines at risk, but their truth-discerning prophets ceaselessly swung the torch of enlightenment back to illuminate their way.

For twelve hundred years, their nation struggled with foreign invaders, internal divisions, separation, captivity, and near extinction as a people. Yet, they endured. Of all the world cultures exposed to the Salem doctrines, the Jews alone survived as a nation worshipping one God.

As the curtain on the first century AD was drawn, the Jews were yet again overrun by a dominating foreign power, this time the Romans. The Romans were the last of the waves of foreign aggressors to ebb over the Hebrews. The travel, trade, and armies of Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Syria, Greece, Parthia, and Rome successively swept over Palestine and they had all left their racial imprint. The Jews owed much of their creative resilience to the providential mix of these many racial strains. The Jewish people evolved as a blended race. They were ideally constituted to carry religious teaching to either the East or the West.

At the crossroads of three continents, their homeland, the region the Roman's called Palestine, was of vital political interest. The Romans had built arterial roads for greater access into and out of the territory. Many of the ancient caravan routes from the East passed through Palestine to gain access to Mediterranean seaports.

The newly born Roman Empire was pulsing with vigorous life. Having cleared the Mediterranean Sea of pirates, the Romans made such abundant navigational use of the sea that they called it their “lake.” Mariners had developed oceanic routes to the British Isles and northern Europe. Caravan routes from the East linked the near Orient to the burgeoning markets of the Mediterranean. Trade and travel flourished; commerce thrived in this “golden age” of Rome. Never before had the seas and overland trade routes borne so many vessels, products, and people.

“Pax Romana”—peace among the nation-states of the empire—created conditions highly conducive to the development and expansion of new ideas, trade, technology, culture, and religion. The entire Mediterranean world was alive with a new commercial and cross-cultural vitality.

The doggedly consistent mindset that produced systematic language, government, and warfare also systematically produced prolific feats of civil and structural engineering. Their Herculean engineering achievements seem scarcely short of miraculous. An intricate network of travel routes linked centers of commerce and culture within one overarching government. People traveled on elaborate networks of well-built roads—an enduring testament to ingenious Roman engineering. The Romans built nearly fifty-thousand miles of primary hard-surface roads—enough to circle the globe *twice*.

Earlier Greek invaders had already established a common language and culture. Through his conquests over three centuries earlier, Alexander the Great of Macedonia had spread a unifying Hellenic culture and language throughout what later became the Roman world. Hellenic art, theater, literature, philosophy, science, sports, and technology infused the empire. The educated classes all spoke Greek.

The Romans had borrowed generously from the Greeks, applying many of their techniques to architecture, engineering, and town planning. Greco-Roman architecture studded the landscape along the eastern Mediterranean. Stone theaters and arenas blossomed wherever the seed of Greek passion for drama and sports took root. Greek arts flowered and Greek philosophy flourished. Stoics, Sceptics, Cynics, and Epicureans won many converts. These philosophies stimulated the educated classes but offered little salvation for the common people.

Though it was an age of prosperity, the wealthy elite gained enormously while the common people barely made do. Merchants and craftsmen had just begun forming a middle class. The majority of people were either slaves or proletariat. The common people of the Roman world hungered for a religious life that would offer comfort, liberty, and salvation from a punishing existence.

With all the achievements of Greek and Roman civilizations, no truly soul-satisfying religion had yet been born. The gentile religions consisted largely of Greco-Roman mythologies, emperor worship, and mystery cults, none of which filled a deep yearning for the solace of the spirit. The later Hebrew prophets portrayed a compassionate God, not just for the nation, but also for the individual—a message that could bring comfort to demoralized masses.

In the previous century, the Romans had empowered Herod the Great to ascend to the throne as agent ruler of the Jews. Herod's friendly relationship with Rome had enabled Jews to continue the dispersion that had begun under Greek rule. With their migrations, they transplanted their long-standing religious traditions and built their synagogues—centers of culture, community, and theology. They lived in virtually every province of the Roman and Parthian empires. Jews constituted about ten percent of the Roman population and as much as forty percent of the population of Alexandria, the center of Greek culture and learning.

The enormous new temple in Jerusalem that Herod the Great had built was the glorious symbolic center of Judaism. Jewish pilgrims, by the hundreds of thousands, regularly attended the annual festivals in Jerusalem, from all over the empire and beyond.

To the north of Jerusalem, cradled by steep picturesque cliffs, the Sea of Galilee lay inland like a vast puddle of deep quiet, its surface six hundred feet below sea level. Ethereal pastel vistas cast a calming aura at sunset and sunrise, but unexpected winds descending from the surrounding cliffs could whip the sea into a turbulent frenzy. During the winter season, heavy rains saturated the fertile soil of the region of Galilee, producing figs, dates, olives, grapes, barley, wheat, and corn in abundance. Fishing trades in the many villages around the lake prospered. More gentiles than Jews lived in that region. The Galilean Jews had assimilated many of the cultural norms of the gentile culture, unlike their compatriots to the south in Judea.

Irrespective of cultural or geographic differences, everywhere Jews were united by one attitude: they fully expected the arrival of their prophesied Messiah, one who would restore their exalted national position as God's chosen people. This was an enchanted age of anticipation. The Jewish people not only believed in miracles; they *expected* them.

An unprecedented world stage had been assembled to establish and disseminate a new worldwide religion. Melchizedek and his thousands of missionaries and their descendants had disseminated a simple gospel about faith in one God; the “axial age” of the sixth century BC had given birth to a spiritual and philosophical resurgence in many ways consistent with Melchizedek’s original teaching; Alexander’s conquests had inaugurated a common language and culture; the Romans had established a widespread infrastructure for government, trade, and travel; Jewish communities and their synagogues had proliferated throughout the empire. The Most Highs, who “rule in the kingdoms of men,” had prepared the way for the coming of the Lord. In this favorable world theater, a profound Jewish teacher would have a unique opportunity to present a new religion, not just for the Hebrew people, but for people of every race and religion. That Teacher was born to humble parents of simple means living in the obscure town of Nazareth.



1 My Hour Has Come

January—December AD 26

Make ready the way of the Lord.

HE ARRIVED AS a helpless infant. The celestial messenger, Gabriel, had told his mother that his name was to be Yehoshua. The Hebrew word meant “Yahweh is Salvation.” Yehoshua ben Yosef was his full name. In English, the name would read “Joshua, son of Joseph.” Later records would adopt a Latin translation of a Greek translation of the Hebrew name; he would be known throughout history as “Jesus.”

If hardship is the anvil on which strong characters are forged, Jesus’ character was forged early. His father, Joseph, died in a construc-

tion accident when Jesus was in his fifteenth year. As the eldest son, Jesus assumed responsibility for the family's economic well-being. His mother, Mary, and his seven younger siblings—James, Miriam, Joseph, Simon, Martha, Jude, and Amos—now depended on him.

Mary had been carrying another child when Joseph died. She gave birth to the youngest and eighth sibling, Ruth, a few months after Joseph's death. Jesus would be the only father she would know.

Like Joseph before him, Jesus worked as a carpenter to support the family. The revenue barely kept pace with expenses, but as his brothers came of age and started their work, the family began to live in modest comfort. James, the next oldest son, grew to manhood and Jesus relinquished his role as head of the family.

Jesus moved to Capernaum on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, where he took work as a boatbuilder for Zebedee, a moderately affluent friend of his father. The boatbuilding shops were on the lake to the south of Capernaum, and Zebedee's home was situated down the lake shore near the fishing headquarters of Bethsaida. Jesus lived with the Zebedee family there. He often went fishing with Zebedee's sons, James, John, and David. Zebedee's wife, Salome, loved Jesus like a son. His co-workers readily accepted him as an accomplished boatbuilder and a trustworthy friend. He regularly sent a portion of his earnings back to Nazareth for the continued support of his family. Throughout the more than a year that he lived there, Jesus frequently visited the caravan station, Capernaum being on the direct travel route from Damascus to Egypt.

With Bethsaida his new home and the whole Zebedee family his close friends, he then ventured out to travel widely—from Rome to the Caspian Sea. He studied the world's religions at the library in Alexandria, sailed the wine-dark Mediterranean, lectured on divine and human sovereignty, and befriended scores of people—wealthy and poor, privileged and enslaved, Jew and gentile. He talked as easily with intellectual adults as he played with the many small children who clamored for his attention. He was uncommonly friendly, engaging, and cheerful.

He lived and worked among men and women in many cultures; he loved them and was loved by them in return. Though the conditions of his bestowal forbid him from having a spouse and children of his own, he had experienced the full dimensions of family life,

having been a surrogate father to his five brothers and three sisters. He knew the grief of loss. Amos, the youngest brother, died three years after his father Joseph.

He worked as a carpenter, like his father, but he also worked as a caravan conductor, a tutor, a blacksmith, a boatbuilder, a fisherman, and a tentmaker. He spoke three languages—Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

Imaginative and practical, humble and confident, rational and tenderhearted, he attained the acme of a unified personality at a young age. Confident, gracious, strong, and industrious, he had become a man of the world, familiar with travel, commerce, nature, languages, religions, climates, and cultures.

After he had become more fully conscious of his divine origin, he met on Mount Hermon, to the north of his homeland, with two of the leading perpetrators of a “war in heaven.” The celestial battle had been waging interminably. Satan and his consort attempted to bring Jesus to their side, but failed to persuade him to align with their seditious schemes. At the conclusion of this momentous meeting, the rebellion that had disrupted a corner of his universe for two hundred thousand years, finally ended.

He could have, there and then, assumed the full measure of sovereignty in his universe; he could have departed from this backward and isolated world. Yet, for two thousand years, the world had been prepared for his arrival. The thought-stream of human consciousness had been patiently cultivated to be more receptive to his message. A nation of believers in one God had been arduously fashioned and they were expecting a Messiah.

He had come into this world, in part, to know men and women well, to walk where they walked, and to know life as they lived it—to *make people more fully known to God*. That, he had accomplished. Now he turned his attention to his next mission—to *make God more fully known to people*.

So that we “might have life and have it more abundantly,”⁵ he returned to his native Galilee and to his work as a boatbuilder in Capernaum, where he awaited “his hour.”

5 Jn 10:10

January AD 26

This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod Antipas tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis—in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zachariah, in the wilderness.⁶

It was written in the book of Isaiah: “Behold I send my messenger before you who shall prepare your way—the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make ready the way of the Lord; make straight a highway for our God.”

And so John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather girdle around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, from all of Judea, and from the region near the Jordan River came out to him. He baptized them in the Jordan as they confessed their sins.

John’s prophetic appearance and piercing denunciations intimidated the religious authorities. He fearlessly chastised the Jewish elite. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come for Baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth fruit that befits repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit, is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the multitude asked him, “What shall we do?”

He answered them, “He who has two coats let him share with him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”

And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you.”

⁶ Lk 3:1-2 Tiberius became co-emperor with Augustus in 11 AD. Pilate was made governor of Judea in 26 AD.

Soldiers also asked, “What shall we do?”

He said to them, “Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely and be content with your wages.”

All the people had been waiting expectantly for the Messiah, and many wondered in their hearts if John might possibly be the One. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.”⁷

News of the brazen prophet spread quickly. Even the most devout Jews felt compelled to submit to his baptism. They believed that the aggregate sins of the people of their nation might have been responsible for their domination by outside political powers. They felt that they needed to submit to baptism, lest they retard the standing of the entire nation in the eyes of God.

When John reached the neighborhood of Pella in his journey up the Jordan, his fame had extended through all Palestine, and his work had become the chief topic of conversation in all the towns about the lake of Galilee. Two of Jesus’ brothers, James and Jude, intended to be baptized. On a Saturday evening in mid-January, they came to consult Jesus about their plans to go to John.

The next day, just before the noon rest, Jesus laid down his tools, removed his work apron, and simply announced to his coworkers, “My hour has come.” He and his brothers embarked for John’s camp. The three travelers tarried for the night in the Jordan Valley and arrived on the scene of John’s baptizing about noon the next day, January 12. They awaited their turn to enter the river.

When they stood before the Baptist, John recognized Jesus and protested, “I have need to be baptized by you. Why do you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

And when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon him.

⁷ Mk 1:2-4; Lk 3:3-17; Mt 3:-10; Jn: 1:24-28

A voice from heaven was heard to say, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” A great change came over his countenance. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness, in the Perea hills to the east.⁸

John

Just as he had visited Mary before Jesus’ birth, the heavenly messenger, Gabriel, had also visited John’s mother, Elizabeth. He had told her that the child in her womb would be the forerunner of the coming spiritual liberator.

Schooling their only son at home, Elizabeth and her husband, Zachariah, had impressed upon John the import of his mission, its connection to Hebrew history and to the history of the world.

Convinced that he would be the prophet of a new age, John had studied the olden prophets intensively. Like Samson and Samuel before him, he had joined the Nazarites, a strict and revered Jewish sect.

As a Nazarite, he had let his hair grow. Like the prophet Amos, he had lived as a shepherd. From an early age, he had worn what Elijah had worn—a hairy garment with a leather girdle. All his young adult life, he had diligently prepared for his life as a prophet.

At about the age of thirty, after his mother died, John had begun preaching, working his way north along the Jordan River from the Nazarite community at Engedi. He had been preaching for over a year when Jesus came to him in the Jordan.

He and Jesus had had little contact while growing up. John was a few months older than Jesus. They had met when both were about the age of six and again at the age of eighteen. Besides those meetings, the two had lived separate and very different lives.

John was a Judean, Jesus a Galilean. John, an only child, had lived his early adult life as a shepherd; Jesus, the brother and surrogate father for eight children, had been a carpenter. John had lived reclusively with the ascetic Nazarite community near the Dead Sea; Jesus had traveled the world meeting people and learning of life in and outside of the Roman Empire. John was blunt; Jesus was friendly and

⁸ Mt: 3:13-17; 4:1

inviting. John thundered at the crowds; Jesus inspired them. John demanded repentance; Jesus welcomed faith.

To disturb the hypocrisy of a fossilized religion, John was ideally suited. The first act of creation is often the turmoil of destruction. John's fiery temperament shattered public confidence in traditional protocol.

John proclaimed a new "kingdom of heaven." The people had been expecting a new world order in which the faithful Jewish nation would be restored and the yoke of foreign oppression thrown off. The idea of a "kingdom of heaven" had become ingrained in the expectations of the Israelites. Jews everywhere expected a Messiah who would inaugurate a new kingdom on earth.

Behold the Son of God, the Deliverer of the world!

In the wilderness, Jesus considered his imminent work. A universe would be watching and learning from his life as a prophet and teacher. Most of the people of Israel were expecting a material redeemer—one who would sit on the throne of David, their exalted legendary king of mythic proportions. They were expecting a national political hero—a *Jewish* Messiah. But his life and work could not be constrained within a narrow political or theological agenda. He had "sheep not of this fold."

While Jesus was in the wilderness, John continued to preach and baptize with renewed confidence and enthusiasm. He confirmed that the promised Deliverer had arrived. Some priests and Pharisees came from Jerusalem. They asked John directly if he was Elijah, the prophet whom Moses promised. When John said, "I am not," they asked, "Are you the Messiah?" and John answered, "I am not." Then they said, "If you are not Elijah, nor the prophet, nor the Messiah, then why do you baptize the people and create all this stir?"

John answered, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"⁹

On an early Sabbath morning, while eating the morning meal with his associates, John looked up and beheld Jesus coming to them.

⁹ Jn 1:19-23