**New Voices**

*After Jesus Before Christianity*

Excerpts and comments by Robert Traer

AJBC asserts, “The first sign that no New Testament existed in the first two centuries is that few people in these movements could read or write; literacy was minimal. Most people of the time were subsistence farmers, weavers and other artisans, day laborers, and merchants. They were known for their ingenuity and aliveness, but few were wealthy and even fewer were authors. In the first and second century one might be able to do the minimal necessary reading for marketplace transactions without ever going to school. People who did not write much, or at all, still were highly skilled at communication in daily life.

“Probably neither Jesus nor the great majority of his followers knew how to read or write. In the first hundred years of the Common Era there is only one story in which Jesus reads, and one in which he writes, bending to draw with his finger on the ground. More to the point, neither Jesus nor most who came after him in the first two centuries focus on writing or reading. They were busy with pithy parables, pointed assertions, clever blessings, and miniature pictures—expression and thought that happens outside the boundaries of writing. The only writer we know about during the first sixty years after the death of Jesus is Paul, who writes letters to specific groups, most of whose members cannot read. Instead, the letters are read to them when they gather to eat and drink, enjoy one another’s company, sing songs, and listen to a story of a letter. Paul writes about their daily lives together—the writing is about practice and not philosophy or theology.

“These groups and makeshift schools were awash in new ideas and practices. But writing, especially writing in the way we tend to think about it in our contemporary world, was rarely the way these thoughts and actions came to the fore. Instead, these people rushed into expressive conversations and attended weekly gatherings where they could speak and listen. Of course, some of these good ideas and beautiful odes would eventually get written down in letters, short stories, and musings, but they were sidebars compared to the riptide of conversations at group means, in workshops, and in the middle of the marketplace.

“With the growth of Jesus movements by the end of the first century, some writings, and even some with longer stories, were read aloud to others. Many of these writings were probably sets of rules and codes of conduct for Jesus clubs and associations, rather than stories about the Anointed.

“The earliest manuscripts of first-century writings are second-hand, third-hand, fourth-hand, or fifth-hand copies from the mid- to late second century. Most of the actual ‘early’ manuscripts of first-century writings were copied during the fourth through sixth centuries. The earliest partial copies from first-century writings are a few tiny papyrus scraps of several sentences only, dated to the second century and later.

“That the members of the many different groups associated with Jesus in these first two hundred years did not read and write strikes twenty-first readers as bizarre or perhaps impossible. Since the writings of the first twenty generations of the movement are the main way we know anything about and understand these Jesus groups, it is difficult today to think that the real people of that time sang, worked, and hung out together but rarely read or wrote. The rare person who had learned to read knew it was a civic duty to read aloud so that others could hear stories, club rules, thoughts of someone else, tombstone epitaphs, and expressions of protest. If we moderns think that reading and writing were important to those early clubs, groups, and schools, we miss most of who they were and how they became excited about Jesus, new kinds of family, or God. (AJBC, 304-306)

In the second century, there were more written materials being read and some circulated. “No one in the second century would have proposed a collection of writings of twenty or thirty documents to act like a ‘New Testament’; there was little interest in a written religious authority in the second century; no one proposed it, and no one assembled something like a New Testament.

“By the end of the second century, Irenaeus, the leader of a Jesus assembly in Lyon (now in southern France), mentions the four Gospels that are now considered part of the canon: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in that order. Irenaeus offers this explanation of the writing of these accounts: “Matthew published a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were proclaiming the gospel in Rome and founding the assembly. After their deaths, Mark, the student and interpreter of Peter, also handed down Peter’s proclamation to us in written form. Luke the follower of Paul, put the gospel proclaimed by Paul down in a book. Then John, the student of the Lord, the one who reclined on the Lord’s breast, he also published the gospel, while living in Ephesus of Asia. (Against Heresies 3.1.1.)”

There is no evidence, however, that confirms the claims by Irenaeus of gospel authorship. If a Gospel of Matthew was written in Aramaic or in Hebrew, it did not survive. The only New Testament writings that did survive were written in Greek.

The authors of AJBC believe, “The New Testament came into being sometime between the mid-fourth and the seventh century, depending on what exactly one means by ‘New Testament.’ AJBC notes that, “only Luke is called a ‘book’ by Irenaeus. Matthew and John are ‘published,’ or in the public domain; Mark is something ‘handed down’ is some sort of written form, though the Greek word here translates best to ‘writtenly.’ Far from offering a picture of a stable four-book set of Gospels, Irenaeus’s statement actually indicates that these writings existed in a variety of forms, as different kinds of written objects that represented different kinds of writers, stories, traditions, and situations. (AJBC, 304-308)

Scholars agree that what we know as the Gospel of Mark was the earliest of the four Gospels included in the New Testament but differ as to when it was actually in its current form. “A number of studies of Mark underline that it is responding to situations of disaster, at least implicitly related to the two unsuccessful wars of Israel against Rome, the countless acts of tortures by the empire, and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. In the versions of Mark that we now read, the absence of Jesus after his death has the potential to be a disaster. This disaster is evident not only in Mark’s opening (‘he is not here,’ Mark 16:6), but across the story. In present story time the ‘bridegroom’ has been taken away (2:20), followers in Judea are fleeing without even grabbing their clothes (13:14-16), the shepherd is struck and the sheep are scattered (14:27), and the disciples, confronted with a missing body, feel abject terror (16:8).

Reading Mark at these early stages of writing, “serves as an extended epitaph for a larger disaster happening to many people. The absence of Jesus and the disasters of Jesus movements and other larger disasters are processed in provisional, yet dramatic, memorial writing.

“These first two hundred years of the Common Era are not the territory of something (to be) called the ‘New Testament.’ There is little organization or dogma, as people and groups work on defining their identities in unsteady but creative times. The writings, the people, and the identities are fresh, free, and incomplete.” (AJBC, 308-316)

The authors of AJBC assert, “Underlying everything we have found is the Roman Empire. The influence of empire is everywhere in early Jesus-group representations of life and practice. Empire actually initiates what one might call the Jesus-group process through the crucifixion of Jesus. The empire’s ongoing violence toward parties of the Anointed became a primary factor in the self-understanding of these communities: they were ones who suffered.

“The life of these groups came out of surviving in the context of the Roman Empire. Their concern was about what to do, how to care for one another. Compared with what they practiced, what they believed was of relatively little concern.

“These communities experimented in many different ways. They organized themselves into and around families. They look at times like clubs and associations, formed schools out of which came new wisdom. They played with gender and sexual boundaries, with some forsaking marriage. They did not seem to be looking for *the* way, but for a whole variety of ways. Women were prominent leaders, patrons, and participants. Belonging to Israel was strongly felt.

“The biggest experiment concerned the representation of safety itself. Generals, kings, and emperors had long been heralded as saviors, fathers of nations, deliverers from evils. Emperors were the divine good powers of the entire inhabited earth. Zeus, the *paterfamilias* of the Greek pantheon, ruler of the gods, was a savior. The emperor, *paterfamilias* of Rome, ruler of defeated nations, was a savior.

Jesus groups in the first two centuries radically changed this image of savior. The savior of these communities was a crucified man: a man tortured and executed through means the empire deemed ultimately humiliating. This crucified man was a source of refuge and bringer of safety. This man’s god, the God of the Judeans—the God of a defeated, humiliated nation—was honored as parent of the known world.

“While the meaning of the world ‘salvation’ now lies blanketed in belief, its ancient heart meant keeping safe, a means or way of safety. Understood this way, the Anointed communities of the first two centuries certainly were interested in salvation. They were deeply invested in the communal work of keeping safe.

“The extent to which communal meals provided the social context for the development of Anointed communities cannot be overestimated. Sharing a meal was the practice that really made these groups happen. The Anointed-group practice of community meals popped up around the empire, forming a diverse set of social organizations in villages, towns, and cities. While many different clubs celebrated meals that connected people, Jesus communities were especially attracted to this practice, and it was their most characteristic trait. Writings from these communities present Jesus as host, guest, and chief honoree of the meal, building off the mean practices of neighboring groups.

“The life that grew up in the practice of these meals provided a safely ordered space in a precarious and dangerous world. The requirement of a certain set of participant behaviors, both moral and practical, ensured that guests at the meal would receive a certain level of respect, honor, and reciprocity from other group members. Adhering to group standards led to the cultivation of specific dispositions focused on caring for others and honoring God.

“Study of the ancient world involves us in a strange paradox: the more we learn, the more we realize we do not know. Our experiment’s conclusion is one of humility at what we cannot know, while realizing that this humility, this recognition of our ignorance and limitations, is also often the long and winding sometimes torturous, path to knowledge. Most of our evidence is fragmentary or missing from the historical record. Much of the evidence we do have may be misleading, promoting only the voices of history’s most powerful, those in a position to say whose voices are heard and whose should be silenced.

“We can, however, and should find power in our vulnerability to the unknown past. In considering new forms of evidence and reconsidering evidence we thought we knew, in considering evidence on its own terms, and on equal terms, so many new and vital voices throng to our attention. These Anointed communities in the first two centuries of the Common Era told many more stories than just the ones now collected in the New Testament, so privileging only those writings later deemed canonical drastically skews the evidence, misreading the evidence of the communities it claims to represent.

“Any experiment worth its salt should be reproducible. A strong hypothesis is one subject to testing; a strong hypothesis needs to be ready to be proved wrong. Our evidence is out there. It has not received sufficient attention in the past,” the authors of AJBC write, “but we invite you to consider it now.” For it is these voices that “can and need to reshape our understanding of group experience and belonging in the two vibrant centuries after Jesus, before Christianity.” (AJBC, 321-326)