

*Interdisciplinary Journal of  
Research on Religion*

---

Volume 11

2015

Article 8

---

Jesus in Interaction:  
The Microsociology of Charisma

Randall Collins\*

Dorothy Swaine Thomas Professor of Sociology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

---

\*collinsr@sas.upenn.edu

# Jesus in Interaction: The Microsociology of Charisma

Randall Collins

Dorothy Swaine Thomas Professor of Sociology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

## Abstract

The dynamics of charisma in social interaction are analyzed through an examination of ninety-three incidents in the Gospels in which Jesus confronts specific individuals face to face. His charisma is shown in the pattern in which Jesus always win an encounter, is always quick and absolutely decisive, seizes the initiative by doing something unexpected, anticipates what the other person is intending, and is master of the crowd. Jesus' low moments happen when he is isolated or when political crowds are against him. The social settings of Jesus' miracles are also analyzed.

What is charisma when you see it? Charismatic leaders are among the most famous individuals of past history and today. What was it like to meet a charismatic leader? How did they make people fall under their spell?

One of the best-described of all charismatic leaders is Jesus. About ninety face-to-face encounters with Jesus are described in the four gospels of the New Testament. Notice what happens in this encounter: Jesus is sitting on the ground, teaching to a crowd in the outer courtyard of the temple at Jerusalem. The Pharisees, righteous upholders of traditional ritual and law, haul before him a woman who was taken in adultery. They make her stand in front of the crowd, and they say to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The Law commands us to stone her to death. What do you say?” Jesus does not look up at them but continues to write in the dirt with his finger. This would not be unusual; Archimedes wrote geometric figures in the dust, and in the absence of ready writing materials, the ground would serve as a chalkboard. The point is that Jesus does not reply right away; he lets the Pharisees and the crowd stew in their uneasiness. Finally, he looks up and says, “Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone.” Then he looks down and continues writing in the dust. Minutes go by. One by one, the crowd starts to slip away, the older ones first—the young hotheads being the ones who do the stoning, as in parts of the Middle East today. Finally, Jesus is left with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightens up and asks her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She answers, “No one.” “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus says. “Go now and sin no more” (John 8: 1–11).

Jesus is a master of timing. He does not allow people to force him into their rhythm or their definition of the situation. He perceives what they are attempting to do—the intention beyond the words—and he makes them shift their ground. Hence the two periods of tension-filled silence: first when Jesus will not directly answer and then when he looks down again at his writing after telling his listeners who should cast the first stone. He does not allow the encounter to focus on himself against the Pharisees. He knows that they are testing him, trying to make him say something that would promote violation of the law or else back down in front of his followers. Instead, Jesus throws it back on their own consciences, their inner reflections about the woman they are going to kill. He individualizes the crowd, causing them to drift off one by one, breaking up the mob mentality.

### *THE MICROSOCIOLOGY OF CHARISMA*

Jesus is a charismatic leader—indeed, he is the archetype of charisma. Although sociologists tend to treat charisma as an abstraction, it is observable in everyday life. In this article, I identify its elements in the encounters between Jesus and the people around him. I focus on encounters that are realistic in every respect and do

not involve miracles—about two thirds of all reported incidents. Because miracles are one of the things that made Jesus famous and that caused controversies right from the outset, in the conclusion I analyze the social pattern of miracles.

### *Jesus Always Wins an Encounter*

When Jesus is teaching in the temple courts, the chief priests and elders come to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they ask. “And who gave you this authority?” Jesus replies: “I will also ask you a question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

They discuss it among themselves and say, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why don’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.” So they answer, “We don’t know where it was from.” Jesus says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (Matthew 21: 23–27; Luke 20: 1–8). He proceeds to tell the crowd a parable comparing two sons who were true or false to their father. Jesus holds the floor, and his enemies do not dare to have him arrested, though they know the parable is about themselves.

Jesus never lets anyone determine the sequence of a conversation. He answers questions with questions, putting the interlocutor on the defensive. An example occurs in early in his career of preaching around Galilee: Jesus has been invited to dinner at the house of a Pharisee. A prostitute comes in and falls at his feet, wets his feet with her tears, kisses his feet, and pours perfume on them. The Pharisee says to himself, “If this man is a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus, reading the Pharisee’s thoughts, says to him, “I have something to tell you.” “Tell me,” he says.

Jesus then tells a story about two men who owe money, neither of whom can repay the moneylender. He forgives them both, the one who owes 500 and the one who owes 50. Jesus asks, “Which of the two will love him more?” “The one who had the bigger debt forgiven,” the Pharisee replies. “You are correct,” Jesus says. “Do you see this woman? You did not give me water for my feet, but this woman wet them with her tears and dried them with her hair. . . . Therefore her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.” The other guests begin to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Jesus says to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7: 36–50).

### *Silencing the Opposition*

Jesus always gets the last word. It is not just that he is good at repartee, topping everyone else; he doesn’t play verbal games but converses on the most serious

level. What it means to win the argument is evident to all, for audience and interlocutor are amazed, astounded, astonished; they cannot say another word. Jesus takes control of the conversational rhythm. For a microsociologist, this is no minor thing; it is in the rhythms of conversation that solidarity is manifested, or alienation, or anger. Conversations with Jesus end in full stop: wordless submission.

Jesus' debate with the Sadducees, another religious sect, ends when "no one dared ask him any more questions" (Luke 20: 40). When a teacher of the Law asks him which is the most important commandment, Jesus answers, and the teacher repeats, "Well said, teacher, you are right in saying, to love God with all your heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus adds, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." From then on, no one dares to ask him any more questions (Mark 12: 28–34).

A famous argument ends the same way: The priests send spies, hoping to catch Jesus in saying something so that they might hand him over to the Roman governor. So they ask: "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus knowing their evil intent, says, "Show me the coin used to pay taxes." When they bring it, he says, "Whose image is on it?" "Caesar's," they reply. Jesus says, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." They are astonished by his answer and are silent (Luke 20: 19–26; Matthew 22: 15–22).

As with the woman taken in adultery, there is an attempted trap, a turning of attention while everyone waits, and a question-and-reply sequence that silences everyone. Jesus does not just preach. It is at moments like this, drawing the interlocutor into his rhythm, that he takes charge.

### *Jesus Is Quick and Absolutely Decisive*

As his mission is taking off in Galilee, followers flock to hear Jesus. He invites some to come with him. It is a life-changing decision.

A man says to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus replies, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead." It is a shocking demand. In a ritually pious society, there is nothing more important than burying your father. Jesus demands a complete break with existing social forms; those who follow them, he implies, are dead in spirit. To another would-be recruit he underlines it: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Luke 9: 57–62; Mark 8: 19–22).

Charisma is total dedication—having it and imparting it to others. There is nothing else by which to value that dedication. Either do it now, or don't bother.

This is how Jesus recruits his inner circle of disciples. He is walking beside the Sea of Galilee and sees Simon and Andrew casting their net into the lake. "Come, follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once, they leave their nets and follow him. A little farther on, Jesus sees James and his

brother John preparing their nets. Without delay, he calls them, and they leave their father in the boat and follow Jesus (Mark 1: 16–20; Matthew 4: 8–22). Luke (5: 1–11) gives a longer story about crowds pressing so closely that Jesus preaches from a boat, but it ends with the same abrupt conversion; here, the influence of the crowd is more visible than it is in Mark’s and Matthew’s truncated versions.

Jesus recruits not from the eminent but from the humble and the disreputable. Among the latter are tax collectors, hated agents of the Roman overlord. There is the same abrupt conversion: As Jesus is passing along the lake followed by a large crowd, he sees a man sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus says, and the man gets up, leaves everything, and follows him. The tax collector has a banquet for Jesus at his house (Luke 5: 27–32; Mark 1: 13–17; Matthew 9: 9–13), with many tax collectors and others eating with the disciples. The Pharisees complain, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus replies, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Jesus perceives who will make a good recruit and who will not.

### *Jesus Always Does Something Unexpected*

Being with Jesus is exciting and energizing, among other reasons because he is always surprising. He does not do or say just what other people expect; even when they regard him as a prophet and a miracle-worker, there is always something else.

Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gather around Jesus and see some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled. They ask Jesus, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus replies, “You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But as to what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”

Jesus goes on with further admonitions, and his opponents accuse him of insulting them. Jesus calls the crowd to him to hear. The disciples come to him privately and ask, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” Jesus replies, “Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

Peter asks Jesus to explain the parable “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asks. “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? . . . But out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them” (Matthew 15: 1–20; Mark 7:

1–23; Luke 11: 37–54). Ritual purification is what concerned the pious and respectable of the time; Jesus meets an accusation with a stronger one. Even his closest disciples do not escape the jolt. “Are you still so dull? Don’t you see?” Everyone has to be on their toes when they are around this man.

How does Jesus generate an unending stream of jolts? He has a program: Mere ritual and the righteous superiority that goes with it are to be brought down and replaced by humane altruism and by spiritual dedication. When his encounters involve miracles—or, rather, people’s reaction to miracles—the program bursts expectations.

On a Sabbath, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and a woman is there who has been crippled for eighteen years, bent over and unable to straighten up. Jesus calls her forward and says to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he puts his hands on her, and immediately she straightens up and praises God. Indignant that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader says to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” Jesus answers him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham . . . be set free on the Sabbath from what bound her?” When he says this, his opponents are humiliated, but the people are delighted (Luke 13: 10–17).<sup>1</sup>

It is not the miracle that is at issue. What makes the greater impression on the crowd is Jesus’ triumph over the ritualists. This is also what leads to the escalating conflict with religious authorities and ultimately to his crucifixion.

Nearer the climax of his life, Jesus enters Jerusalem with a crowd of his followers who have traveled with him from Galilee in the north, picking up enthusiastic converts along the way. He enters Jerusalem in a triumphant procession, greeted by crowds waving palm fronds. The next morning, he goes to the temple. There, he finds people in the courtyard selling cattle, sheep, and doves and other people sitting at tables exchanging money. Jesus makes a whip out of cords and drives the sheep and cattle from the temple courtyard. He scatters the coins of the money changers and overturns their tables. To those who were selling doves, he says, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” Another text quotes him as saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of thieves.’” The chief priests and teachers of the law hear this and begin looking for a way to kill Jesus. They fear him because the whole crowd is amazed at his teaching (John 2: 13–16; Mark 11: 15–19).

One text gives a telltale detail: Immediately after entering Jerusalem among the palm-waving crowd, Jesus goes into the temple courtyard. He looks around at

---

<sup>1</sup> Similar conflicts about healing on the Sabbath are in Matthew (12: 1–14) and Luke (6: 6–11, 14: 1–6, the latter of which ends by silencing the opposition).

everything, but it is already late, so he goes out to the nearby village of Bethany with the Twelve (Mark 11: 11) Jesus clearly intends to make a big scene, but he is going to do it at the height of the business day, not in the slack time of late afternoon when the stalls are almost empty. Jesus always shows strategic sense.

Why are animals and the money changers in the temple in the first place? They are there because of ritualism: The animals are to be bought for burnt sacrifices, and the money changers are to facilitate the visitors from distant locations. But it was also the case throughout the ancient world, and in the medieval one as well, that temples and churches were primary places of business and open spaces for crowds, idlers, speculators, and merchants of all sorts. In Babylon and elsewhere, the temples themselves acted as merchants and bankers (and may have originated such enterprises); in Phoenicia and the coastal cities of sin that were anathema to the Old Testament prophets, temples rented out prostitutes to travelers. Greek temples collected treasure in the form of bronze offerings and later became stores of gold. Jesus no doubt had all this in mind when he set out to cleanse the temple of secular transactions that were corrupting its pure religious purpose.

Jesus is shocking not just on the large public scene; he also continues to upend his own disciples' expectations. In seclusion at Bethany, he is reclining at the dinner table when a woman comes with an alabaster jar of expensive perfume. She breaks the jar and pours the perfume on his head. Some of the disciples say indignantly to each other, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." They rebuke the woman harshly. "Leave her alone," Jesus says. "She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare me for my funeral" (Mark 14: 1–10; Matthew 26: 6–13).

Jesus has given his disciples a double jolt. By now, they have understood the message about the selfishness of the rich and charity to the poor. But there are circumstances and momentous occasions that transcend even the great doctrine of "love thy neighbor." That is the first jolt. Jesus is Zen-like in his unexpectedness. His disciples do not quite get the second jolt. Jesus knows that he is going to be crucified. He has the political sense to see where the confrontation is headed; in this, he is ahead of his followers, who see only his power.

### *Jesus Knows What the Other Is Intending*

Jesus is an intelligent observer of the people around him. He does not have to be a magical mind reader. He is highly focused on everyone's moral and social stance, and sees it in the immediate moment. Charismatic people are generally like that; Jesus does it to a superlative degree.

He perceives not just what people are saying, but how they are saying it; a sociolinguist might say, speech actions speak louder than words. So it is not surprising that Jesus can say to his disciples at the last supper, “One of you will betray me,” no doubt noting the furtive and forced looks of Judas Iscariot. Or that he can say to Peter, his most stalwart follower, that before the cock crows, Peter will have denied him three times, knowing how strong blustering men also can be swayed when the mood of the crowd goes against them in the atmosphere of a lynch mob (Mark 14: 17–31; Matthew 26: 20–35; John 13: 20–38).

Most of these examples have an element of Jesus reading the intentions of his questioners, as when they craftily try to trap him into something for which he can be held liable. Consider some cases in which the situation is not so fraught but Jesus knows what is going on: Invited to the house of a prominent Pharisee, Jesus noticed how the guests vied for the places of honor at the table. He tells them a parable: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than yourself may have been invited . . . and, humiliated, you will have to move to the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Then Jesus says to the host, “. . . When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you—as your relatives and rich friends would by inviting you back—you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14: 7–16). It is an occasion to deliver a sermon, but Jesus starts it with the situation they are in: the unspoken but none-too-subtle scramble for the best seats at the table. He makes a sociological point about the status reciprocity that is involved in the etiquette of exchanging invitations.

Jesus sees what matters to people. A rich young man, inquiring sincerely about his religious duties, runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees. “Good teacher,” he asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asks, as usual answering a question with a question. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor give false testimony, nor defraud; honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” the young man declares, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looks at him and says, “One thing you lack. Go, and sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” At this, the man’s face falls. He goes away sad because he has great riches and cannot give them up (Mark 10: 17–22; Luke 18: 18–30; Matthew 19: 16–26).

Jesus knows whom to recruit, who is ready for instantaneous commitment, by watching them. As Jesus and his crowd of followers passes through Jericho, a

chief tax collector wants to see Jesus, but because the man is short, he cannot see over the heads of the crowd. So he runs ahead and climbs a tree. When Jesus reaches the spot, he looks up and says, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” People begin to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus says to Jesus, “Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay him back four times the amount” (Luke 19: 1–10).

This is the theme again: recruiting among sinners. But Jesus is a practical leader as well as an inspirational one. He normally sends out forerunners to line up volunteers to lodge and feed his traveling followers (Luke 10: 1–16; Matthew 26: 17–19). In this case, he has picked out a man who is rich (class distinctions would have been very visible) and who is notably eager to see him. No doubt Jesus’ perceptiveness also enables him to pick out early disciples such as Peter and the other fishermen.

Jesus’ perceptiveness helps to explain why he dominates his encounters. He surprises interlocutors by unexpectedly jumping from their words, not to what conventionally follows verbally but instead speaking to what they are really concerned about, skipping the intermediate stages.

### *Jesus Is Master of the Crowd*

The important events of Jesus’ life take place mainly in crowds. Of ninety-three distinct incidents of Jesus’ adult life described in the gospels, there are at most five occasions when he is with three or fewer other people.<sup>2</sup> When he is outdoors,

---

<sup>2</sup> Two of John the Baptist’s disciples seek out Jesus after John has pointed him out in the crowd of the Baptist’s own followers, and the two spend the afternoon visiting Jesus where he stays. This is before Jesus is baptized and starts his own mission (John 1: 35–42). On another occasion, Jesus and three disciples go to pray up on a mountain, where they see him transfigured (Luke 9: 28–30; Matthew 17: 1–13; Mark 9: 2–13). When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well while his disciples have gone into town for provisions, they have a one-on-one conversation, and many people in her village become believers that Jesus is the savior of the world, among other reasons because he has broken the taboo on Jews associating with Samaritans (John 4: 31–42). One night, Jesus is visited by a Pharisee who is a member of the ruling council; no one else is mentioned as being present, although the conversation leads to some of the most famous Bible passages: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3: 1–21). Presumably, someone heard this and wrote it down; this is not unlikely, since Jesus always stayed in a house full of his disciples. Near the end of his life, Jesus goes with his disciples (the Twelve minus Judas) and at least some others to pray at Gethsemane. Jesus then takes three close followers, goes a little farther into the garden, and prays in anguish while the others fall asleep (Mark 14: 32–42; Matthew 26: 36–46). This is the one important place in the narration where Jesus is alone and the one time when he shows anxiety. I do not count the forty days he spent praying in the wilderness before beginning his ministry; the only incidents that are described for this period are not pinned down in time and circumstance, and all involve talking with the devil. I discuss these below in the section on apparitions.

he is almost entirely surrounded by crowds. In the early part of his mission in Galilee, he periodically escapes the crowds by going out on boats and climbing remote mountainsides to pray in solitude. The crowds increase and follow him wherever he goes. Indoors, six incidents take place at banquets, including an overflow wedding party; three occur in synagogues; and two are hearings before public authorities. There are also nine occasions when Jesus is backstage, so to speak, with his disciples, although often there is a crowd outside and people get in to see him. Altogether, for Jesus, a relatively intimate gathering is somewhat more than a dozen people, and most of his famous interactions take place with scores up through hundreds or even several thousands of people amid whom he is the center of attention.

Crowds are a major source of Jesus' power. There is a constant refrain: "The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7: 29). His enemies the high priests are afraid of what his crowd of followers will do if they attack Jesus. As the challenge mounts in Jerusalem on the last and greatest day of the Passover festival, Jesus preaches in the temple courts in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink." The crowds are divided on whether he is the Messiah. The temple guards retreat to the chief priests, who ask them, "Why don't you arrest him?" "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards reply. "The mob knows nothing of the law," the Pharisees retort, "there is a curse on them" (John 7: 37–49).

Judas' betrayal of Jesus consists in telling the priests when and where Jesus will be alone so that he can be arrested—alone, relatively speaking, that is; there are at least a dozen of his followers with him at Gethsemane, but it is for arranging the absence of the crowd that Judas receives his thirty pieces of silver (Luke 22: 2–6). The signal is to mark Jesus with a kiss so that the guards will know whom to seize in the dark.

Charismatic leaders live on crowds. There is no such thing as a charismatic leader who is not good at inspiring crowds—and, the microsociologist adds, being super-energized by them in turn. Crowd and leader are parts of a circuit, emotional intensity and rhythmic coordination flowing from one to the other: charisma as high-amp electrical current. It is what the Bible, especially in the Book of Acts, calls the holy spirit.

Jesus as archetype of the charismatic leader also shows how a charismatic movement is organized. His life moves in three spheres: crowds, the inner circle of his twelve disciples, and withdrawing into solitude. The third of these does not figure much in the narration of important events, but we can surmise, from sociological research on prayer, that during those times, Jesus reflects in inner dialogue on what is happening in the outer circles and forms his resolve as to what he will do next.

The inner circle has a practical aspect and a personal aspect. Jesus recruits his inner disciples, the Twelve, because he wants truly dedicated followers who will accompany him everywhere. For them, that means giving up all outside commitment, leaving occupation, family, and hometown. It means leaving behind all property and trusting that supporters will bring them the means of sustenance, day after day. In effect, they are monks, although they are not called that yet. Thus the inner circle depends on the outer circle, the crowds of supporters who give not only their emotion, but also food, lodging, and whatever else is needed. Jesus is the organizer of a movement, and he directs his lieutenants and delegates tasks to them. Early in his mission, when the crowds are burgeoning, he recognizes that “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” and sends out the Twelve to preach and work miracles on their own, accelerating the cascade of still more followers and supporters (Luke 9: 1–6; Mark 6: 7–13; Matthew 9: 35–38; 10: 1–20).

When Jesus travels, it is not just with the Twelve, but with a larger crowd (who are also called disciples), who are somewhere between casual supporters and his inner circle. These include some wealthy women—an ex-prostitute known as Mary Magdalene, women who have been cured by Jesus, the wife of a manager of King Herod’s household—and they help to defray expenses with their money (Luke 8: 1–3). Even the Twelve have a treasurer, Judas Iscariot, pointing up the ambiguity of money for a movement of self-chosen poverty. With big crowds to take care of, Jesus expands his logistics staff to seventy (Luke 10: 1–16). He concerns himself about whose house they will eat in. Jesus accepts all invitations, even from his enemies the Pharisees. He especially seems to choose tax collectors, since they are both rich and hospitable and recognize their own need of salvation. It is the size of his peripatetic crowds that brings about the need for multiplying loaves and fishes and turning water into wine. Jesus’ crowds are not static but growing, and this is part of their energy and excitement.

The inner circle is not just his trusted staff. It is also his backstage, where he can speak more intimately and discuss his concerns and plans. “Who do people say I am?” Jesus asks the Twelve when the movement is taking off. They reply, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” “But what do you say?” Jesus asks. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus warns them not to tell anyone. Jesus goes on to tell them that the Son of Man will be rejected by the chief priests and that he must be killed and rise again in three days. Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Jesus turns and looks at the rest of the disciples. “Get thee behind me, Satan!” he says. “Your mind is not on the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Mark 8: 27–33; Matthew 16: 13–23).

There is a certain amount of jostling over who are the greatest of the disciples, the ones closest to Jesus. Jesus always rebukes this; there is to be no intimate circle closer than the privacy shared by the Twelve. Jesus’ charisma is not a show

put on for the crowds with the help of his staff; he is charismatic all the time, backstage as well. Jesus loves and is loved, but he has no special friends. No one understands what he is really doing until after his death.

Jesus is famous for speaking in parables. Especially when referring to himself, he uses figurative expressions such as “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” and “the shepherd and his sheep.” The parables mark a clear dividing line. He uses parables when he is speaking to the crowds and especially to potential enemies such as the Pharisees. The meaning of the parables, apparently, does not come through easily, but audiences are generally impressed by them—amazed and struck speechless, among other reasons because the parables exemplify the clever style of talking that deflects questions in unexpected directions. “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear!” Jesus proclaims (Mark 4: 9).

The twelve disciples are not much better at deciphering parables, at least in the earlier part of his mission, but Jesus treats them differently. It is in private among the Twelve that he explains the meaning of parables in ordinary language, telling “the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4: 10–34; Matthew 13: 34–52; Luke 8: 4–18). They are the privileged in-group, and they know it. Jesus admonishes them from time to time about their pride, but he needs them, too. It is another reason why living with Jesus is bracing. There is an additional circuit of charismatic energy in the inner circle.

But it is the crowds that feed the core of the mission: the preaching and the miraculous signs. As his movement marches on Jerusalem, opposition mobilizes. Now Jesus begins to face crowds that are divided or hostile.

The crowd begins to accuse him: “You are demon-possessed.” Jesus shoots back, “Stop judging by appearances, but instead judge correctly.” Some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask each other, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is speaking publically, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes no one will know where he is from.” Jesus cries out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.” According to John (7: 14–31): “At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. . . . Still, many in the crowd believed in him.”

In another encounter, those who heard his words were divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?” But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (John 10: 19–21).

The struggle shifts to new ground. The festival crowd gathers around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answers, “I did tell you, but you did not believe. The works I do in

my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. . . . My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." His opponents pick up stones, but Jesus says to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any good work," they reply, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." Jesus says, "Why do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." Again they try to seize him, but he escapes their grasp (John 10: 24–42).

Jesus can still arouse this crowd, but he cannot silence it. He does not back off but becomes increasingly explicit. The metaphors that he does use are not effective. The sheep to which he refers are his own crowd of loyal followers, and Jesus declares that he has given eternal life to them but not to this hostile crowd of unbelievers. Words no longer convince; the sides declaim stridently against each other. The eloquent phrases of earlier preaching have fallen into cacophony. Nevertheless, Jesus still escapes violence. The crowd is never strong enough to dominate him. Only the organized authorities can take him, and that he does not evade.

### *Jesus' Low Moments*

Most of the challenges to Jesus' charisma happen during the showdown in Jerusalem. A revealing occasion happens early, when Jesus visits his hometown Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue. At first, the crowd is amazed, but then they start to question: Isn't this the carpenter's son? Aren't his mother and brothers and sisters among us? Where did he get these powers he has been displaying in neighboring towns? When Jesus reads the scroll and says, "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," they begin to argue. Jesus retorts, "No prophet is honored in his home town" and quotes examples of how historic prophets were rejected. The people in the synagogue are furious. They take him to the edge of town and try to throw him off the edge of a cliff. "But he walked right through the crowd and went his way" (Luke 4: 14–30; Matthew 13: 53–58). Even here, Jesus can handle hostile crowds. Including this incident of failure encourages confidence in the narrative.

Another personal challenge comes when Jesus performs one of his most famous miracles: bringing Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus' relationship with Lazarus is described as especially close. Lazarus is the brother of the two sisters Mary and Martha, in whose house Jesus liked to stay, and Lazarus is referred to as "the one you [Jesus] love." Jesus had been staying at their house a few miles out-

side Jerusalem, a haven at the time when his conflict with the high priests at the temple was escalating. When the message comes that Lazarus is sick, Jesus is traveling away from trouble. Although his disciples remind him that the Jerusalem crowd tried to stone him, he decides to go back. Yet he delays two days before returning, apparently planning to wait until Lazarus dies and then perform the miracle of resurrecting him. First, he says to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him up." When this figure of speech is taken literally, he tells them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

When Jesus arrives back in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. A crowd has come to comfort the sisters. Why were they so popular? No doubt their house was strongly identified with the Jesus movement; therefore a big crowd is present, as always when Jesus performs a healing miracle.

But this is the public aspect. In the personal aspect, each of the sisters separately comes to meet Jesus, and each says, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." After Mary, the second sister, says this, Jesus sees her weeping and the crowd who has come with her also weeping. He is deeply moved (the King James translation says, "groaning in himself"). "Where have you laid him?" Jesus asks. "Come and see," Mary answers. Then Jesus weeps. They come to the tomb. Jesus has them roll away the stone from the entrance. Again deeply moved, Jesus calls out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" For some time afterward, people come to Bethany to see Lazarus, the man who had been raised from the dead (John 11: 1–46).

Leaving aside the miracle itself and its symbolism, one thing that we see in this episode is Jesus conflicted between his mission—to demonstrate the power of resurrection—and his personal feelings for Lazarus and the two sisters. Jesus let Lazarus die by staying away during his sickness to make this demonstration, but in doing so, he caused grief to those he loved. The moment when he confronts their pain (amplified by the weeping of the crowd), Jesus himself weeps. It is the only time in the texts when he weeps. It is a glimpse of Jesus as a human being as well as a man on a mission.

Jesus' next moment of human weakness comes in the garden at Gethsemane. "Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." Although he has left his disciples nearby with instructions to "pray that you will not fall into temptation," they have all fallen asleep, exhausted from sorrow. Jesus complains to Peter, "Couldn't you keep watch with me for one hour?" But he adds, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." But they do not know what to say to Jesus (Luke 22: 39–46; Mark 14: 32–42; Matthew 26: 36–46). Everybody's emotional energy is low.

Particularly personal is the passage in which Jesus on the cross sees his mother standing below, "and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby. Jesus said to

her: ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, the disciple took her into his house” (John 19: 25–27). What is so telling about this is the contrast with an event during Jesus’ early preaching in Galilee, when his mother and siblings try to make their way to him through a crowd of followers. Someone announces, “Your mother and your brothers are outside waiting to see you.” Jesus looks at those seated in a circle around him and says: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Luke 8: 19–21; Mark 3: 31–35). But on the cross, Jesus is thinking not only of fulfilling scripture, but also of his own lifetime relationships. Pierced by pain, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then, after making a loud cry, Jesus dies (Mark 15: 21–41; Matthew 27: 30–55). Ancient myths of dying and annually resurrecting nature-gods are not described like this—that is, humanly. Nor are the heroic deaths of Plutarch’s noble Greeks and Romans.

Other than in the anxious hours of waiting at Gethsemane and the torture of the crucifixion, Jesus confronting his accusers is in form and on message. When the high priests and temple guards approach to arrest him, Jesus calmly asks who they want. “Jesus of Nazareth,” they reply. When he says, “I am he,” they shrink back. Jesus takes the initiative: “If you are looking for me, let these men go.” When the guards seize Jesus, one of his followers draws a sword and cuts off the ear of a priest’s servant. “Put away your sword!” Jesus says to him, “for all who live by the sword will die by the sword.” To the hostile crowd, he says, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not dare to arrest me. But this is your hour” (Matthew 26: 47–56; Luke 22: 47–55; John 18: 1–12).

Then all his disciples desert him and flee. Peter, the boldest of them, follows at a distance to the outer courtyards of the Temple when Jesus is being interrogated within. But Peter too is intimidated when servants question whether he isn’t one of Jesus’ followers. Peter denying Jesus shows how Jesus’ own crowd has been dispersed, broken up and unable to assemble, and, in the face of a hostile crowd, lose their faith. Strength is in the crowd, and now the opposing crowd holds the attention space.

But indoors, in a smaller setting of rival authorities, Jesus holds his own. Before the assembly of the high priests, Jesus wins the verbal sparring, if not the verdict. Many hostile witnesses testify, but their statements do not agree. The priests try to get Jesus to implicate himself, but he keeps a long silence and then says, “I said nothing secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me.” An official slaps him in the face and demands, “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” Jesus replies, “If what I said is wrong, testify as to what is wrong. If I spoke the truth, why do you strike me?” The chief priest challenges Jesus bluntly:

“Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” “You have said so,” Jesus replies (Mark 14: 53–65; Matthew 26: 57–63; John 18: 19–24).

Finally, Jesus is taken before Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus gives his usual sharp replies and indeed wins Pilate over. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asks in return, “or did others talk to you about me?” Pilate says, “Your own people and chief priests have handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” Jesus says, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would prevent my arrest.” “You are a king, then!” says Pilate. Jesus answers, “You say I am a king. In fact, I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” “What is truth?” Pilate replies but breaks off before Jesus can answer (Mark 15: 1–5; Matthew 27: 11–26; John 18: 24–40).

Pilate then goes to the crowd that has gathered outside the palace to say that he has found no basis for a charge against Jesus. Pilate tries to set Jesus free on a legal loophole but gives in to the crowd’s demand for crucifixion. After Jesus dies, Pilate gives permission for a sympathizer to take the body away instead of leaving it for ignominious disposal. Pilate’s behavior, too, comes across the centuries as real.

In the crises that start with his arrest, Jesus’ interactional style remains much the same as always, but the speaking in parables and figurative language have given way to blunt explanations. Parables are for audiences who want to understand. Facing open adversaries, Jesus turns to plain arguments.

Charisma, above all, is the power to make crowds resonate with oneself. Does this mean that charisma vanishes when the power over crowds goes away?<sup>3</sup> If that were the case, charisma would not be a force in drawn-out conflicts. It might be more useful to say that charisma has its home base, its center in enthusiastic crowds, even when the charismatic leader is sometimes cut off from base.

Charisma is a fragile mode of organization because it depends on enthusiastic crowds repeatedly assembling. Its nemesis is more permanent organization, whether based on family and patronage networks or on bureaucracy. Jesus loses the political showdown because the authorities intimidate his followers from assembling and then strike at him with a combination of their organized power of temple and state, bolstered by mobilizing an excited crowd of their own that is chanting for Jesus’ execution. But even at his crucifixion, Jesus wins over some individual Roman soldiers (Luke 23: 47; Matthew 27: 54), although that is not enough to buck the military chain of command. This tells us that the charismatic leader relates to the crowd by personally communicating with individuals in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Historical examples include the public popularity of Gorbachev, which rocketed like fireworks in the middle of the 1980s in a movement for Soviet reform but dissipated rapidly in 1991 when he was overtaken by political events and shunted aside. Jesus has a stronger version of charisma that survives adversity

crowd, a multiplication of one-to-one relationships from the center to many audience members. But charismatic communication cannot overcome a formal, hierarchic organization in which individuals follow orders irrespective of how they personally feel.<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen, Jesus can handle hostile questioning from crowds in the temple courts, even if opponents have been planted there by an enemy hierarchy. It is not the crowd calling for crucifixion that overpowers Jesus, but the persistent opposition of the priestly administration. Sociologically, the difference is between charismatic experience in the here-and-now of the crowd and the long-distance coordination of an organization that operates beyond the immediate situation.

### *Victory Through Suffering, Transformation Through Altruism*

When Jesus is arrested in the garden at Gethsemane, he tells his militant defenders not to resist. “Do you think I cannot call my Father, who will send twelve legions of angels? But how would the scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26: 47–56). Jesus does not aim to be just a miracle worker; he is out to transform religion entirely.

Miracles, acts of faith, and power in the emotionally galvanized crowd are ephemeral episodes. As Jesus goes along, his miracles become parables of his mission. He heals the sick, gives the disabled new life, and stills the demonic howling of people in anguish. He lives in a world that is both highly stratified and callous. The rich are arrogant and righteous in their ritual correctness—an elite at the center of prestigious ceremonials (see Durkheim 1912/1965). They observe the taboos and view the penurious (and therefore dirty) underclass not just with contempt but as sources of pollution. Jesus leads a revolution, not in politics but in morals. From the beginning, he preaches among the poor and disabled and stirs them with a new source of emotional energy. Toward the rich and ritually dominant, he directs the main thrust of his call for repentance: It is their attitude toward the wretched of the earth that needs to be reformed. The Jesus movement is the awakening of altruistic conscience.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The “cast the first stone” incident shows, in contrast, how a charismatic leader can take apart a hostile crowd by forcing its members to consult their own consciences.

<sup>5</sup> The movement did not start with Jesus. John the Baptist had also preached the main points: concern for the poor, opposition to the arrogance of the rich. Earlier, Jewish prophets such as Isaiah and Amos had railed against injustice to the poor. Around Jesus’ time, there may have been inklings of altruism in the Mediterranean world, but if so, they had little publicity or organization. Greek and Roman religious cults and public largesse were directed to the elite, or at most to the politically active class, and did not strike a note of altruism toward the truly needy. The Carthaginians’ ritual sacrifices of children for military victory carried took place in a moral universe that is unimaginable to modern people. Middle Eastern kingship was even more rank-conscious and ostentatiously cruel (see Collins 2014).

The moral revolution has three dimensions: altruism, monastic austerity, and martyrdom.

*Altruism.* Altruism becomes an end in itself and the highest value. Giving up riches and helping the poor and disabled are not just aimed at improving material conditions for everyone. Altruism is not a worldly revolution, not a populist uprising, but making human sympathy the moral ideal. Blessed are the poor, the mourning, the humble, Jesus preaches, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Luke 6: 17–23). Altruism comes onto the scene historically as the pathway to otherworldly salvation.<sup>6</sup> What is important for human lives is the change in the moral ideal; it not only gives hope to the suffering but also calls the elite to judge themselves by their altruism and not by their arrogance.

The movement is underway at least a little before Jesus launches his mission at age 30. John the Baptist preaches repentance before the coming wrath. “What should we do?” the crowd asks. John answers, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors come to be baptized. “Teacher,” they say, “what should we do?” John replies, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” Soldiers ask him, “And what should we do?” He replies, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (Luke 3: 1–14). Repentant sinners are baptized in the river. To the Pharisees and Sadducees—who will not repent and be baptized—John thunders, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” Later, when John’s disciples come to visit Jesus’ disciples, Jesus speaks to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? . . . A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, and more than a prophet.” Jesus goes on to compare his mission to John’s. “John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But wisdom is proved right by all her children’” (Luke 7: 18–35). Jesus not only amplifies John’s mission, but also moves into another niche: not the extreme asceticism of the desert but the lower and middle classes of the towns and villages.

---

<sup>6</sup> The mystery cults of the Hellenistic world (Orphics, Hermeticists, Neo-Pythagoreans and Neo-Platonists, various kinds of Gnostics, etc.) had the idea of otherworldly salvation but not the morality of altruism. Their salvation was purely selfish, and their pathways were merely secret rituals and symbols. They were still on the ancient side of the revolution of conscience.

*Monastic Austerity.* Jesus' disciples give up all property, becoming (as John the Baptist did) the poorest of the poor.<sup>7</sup> But the disciples are not as the ordinary poor and disabled. They retain their health and have an abundance of the richness of spirit, that is, emotional energy, which they call faith. Committed disciples who have left family, home, and occupation rely on the enthusiasm of a growing social movement to provide them with daily sustenance. They live at the core of the movement. Since this location is the prime source of emotional energy, there is an additional sense in which living by faith alone is powerful.

Later, this arrangement was to become institutionalized as the relationship between monks and lay people.<sup>8</sup> During the missionary expansion of Christianity, monks would be the pioneers, winning converts and patrons on the pagan frontiers through personal impressiveness—their institutionalized charisma, which is to say Christian techniques of disciplined austerity generating emotional strength. Still later, movements such as the Franciscans, who deliberately gave up monastic seclusion to wander in the ordinary world among the poor and disabled, would combine austerity with a renewed spirit of altruism and thereby create the idealistic social movement. Altruistic movements would first use modern political tactics for influencing the state in the antislavery movement of the late 1700s, but they built on the moral consciousness and social techniques that first became visible with the Jesus movement.

*Martyrdom.* The crucifixion of Jesus becomes not the end of the movement, but its rallying point. The cross becomes the symbol of its members and a source of personal inspiration for individuals in times of suffering and defeat. We are so used to this symbol that the enormity of the shift is lost on us. Crucifixion, which existed for several hundred years previously in the authoritarian kingdoms of the Middle East before spreading to Rome, was an instrument of death by slow torture, a visible threat of state terrorism. When the Spartacist revolt of gladiators was put down in 71 B.C.E., the Romans crucified captured gladiators for hundreds of miles along the roads of southern Italy. To turn the cross into a symbol of a movement—and of its triumph—was a blatant in-your-face gesture of the moral revolution: We cannot be beaten by physical coercion, by pain and suffering, it says; we have transformed them into our strength. Martyrs succeed when they generate movements and are energized by the emotional solidarity of standing together in a conflict, even in defeats.

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew (3: 1–8) stresses the asceticism of John, a wild man who lived in the wilderness on locusts and honey, dressed in clothes made of camel's hair.

<sup>8</sup> There were precedents of monasticism in the 300s B.C.E. such as the Cynics, who lived in ostentatious austerity (Diogenes, for example, lived in a barrel). The Cynics denounced the pitfalls and hypocrisy of seeking riches and power, but they lacked any concern for the poor and did not advocate altruism.

That is why ancient cultural precedents of fertility gods who die by dismemberment but are resurrected like the coming of the crops in the following year do not contain the social innovation of Christianity. Fertility gods may be depicted as suffering, but their message is not moral strength, and their cult concerns recurring events in the material world, not otherworldly salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Martyrdom also becomes institutionalized in the repertoire of religious movements. In its early centuries, Christianity grows above all by spectacular and well-publicized martyrdom of its hero-leaders.<sup>10</sup> Martyrdom becomes a technique for protest movements, and movement-building.

“What does not kill me, makes me stronger,” Nietzsche was to write. Ironically, for all his attacks on the moral revolution of Christianity, this is a Christian discovery that he is citing. Religious techniques set precedents for modern secular politics. Protest movements win by attracting widespread sympathy for their public sufferings, turning the moral tables on those who use superior force against them. This too is world-changing. It is little exaggeration to say that the moral forces of the modern world were first visible in the Jesus movement.

#### *THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MIRACLES*

Some modern people think that Jesus never existed or that the stories about him are myths. The details of how Jesus interacted with people in the situations of everyday life consistently show a distinctive personality. All texts about the ancient past are subject to distortion and mythologizing tendencies, but an objective scholar, with no axe to grind one way or the other, would conclude that what we read of Jesus is as valid as what Plutarch summarizes from prior sources about Alexander or Pericles or what other classical writers reported about exemplary heroes. The gospels have the advantage of having been written closer to the lifetime of their subject and possibly by several of Jesus' close associates.

What about the miracles? I will focus on what a microsociologist can see in the details of social interaction, especially what happens before and after a miracle. I will examine only the miracles that are described as happening in a specific situation, a time and place with particular people present. Summaries of miracles

---

<sup>9</sup> Euripides is the nearest to an altruistic liberal in the Greek world; but his play *The Bacchae*, which depicts an actual contemporary movement of frenzied dancers that challenged older Greek religious cults, breathes an atmosphere of ferocious violence and revenge, the polar opposite of the Christian message of forgiveness and charity. Euripides' plays focus the audience's sympathy on the sufferings of individual characters, but these are members of elite families who suffer in from shifting fortunes of the upper classes. There is not even a glance at the poor.

<sup>10</sup> There is also a quieter form of conversion through networks in which individuals are attracted to the religious organization's moral style, its care for the sick, and its organizational strength (Stark 1996).

by Jesus and his disciples do not give enough detail to analyze them, although they give a sense of what kinds of miracles were most frequent.

Let us go back to a question that has been hanging since I discussed the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus attracts big crowds by his preaching and by his miracles. He preaches an overthrow of the old ritualism, an ethic of humility and altruism toward the poor and disabled, and the coming of the true kingdom of God, so different from this rank-conscious world. He also performs miracles, chiefly medical cures through faith healing, casting out demons from individuals who are possessed, and bringing back a few people from the cusp of death. There are also some nature miracles and some apparitions, although these should be considered separately because they almost never occur among crowds.

The roster of miracles that are described in detail include twenty-two healing miracles, all of which happen in big crowds; three logistics miracles, in which Jesus provides food or drink for big crowds; five nature miracles, which take place when Jesus is alone with his inner twelve disciples or some of them; and two apparitions: one with three close disciples, one in a crowd. So is Jesus chiefly a magician? Are we in the realm of wonders, superstition, or sleight-of-hand tricks? I will confine the discussion to some sociological observations.

Which comes first: the preaching or the miracles? The gospels are not strictly chronological, and sequences vary among them, but it is clear that there are a lot of miracles early on, and this is one of the things that attracts excited crowds to Jesus. People bring with them the sick, the lame, the blind, and other helpless and pathetic individuals. This is itself is a sign of incipient altruism, since on the whole, ancient people were quite callous, engaging in deliberately cruel punishments, routinely violent atrocities, and a propensity to shun the unfortunate rather than help them. Jesus' emphasis on the lowly of the earth meshes with his medical miracles; they are living signs of what he is preaching in a more ethical sense.

Jesus' healing miracles always happen in the presence of crowds. If that is so, how did the first miracles happen? What brought the first crowds together must have been Jesus' preaching. This is particularly likely because John the Baptist was attracting large crowds and had his own movement of followers. John did not perform medical miracles or any other kind, and he preached the same kind of themes as Jesus at the outset—humility and the poor, repentance, and the coming kingdom of God—except that John explicitly said that someone else was coming to lead the way.

The plausible sequence is that Jesus attracted crowds by his preaching and it was in the midst of the crowds' enthusiasm—their faith—that the healing miracles take place.<sup>11</sup> That miracles depend on the faith of the crowd is underscored

---

<sup>11</sup> The word *enthusiasm* comes from the Greek *enthous*, which means “possessed by a god [*theos*].”

by Jesus' failure in Nazareth, his home town. "And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Luke 4: 14–30; Matthew 13: 53–58).

Jesus' healing miracles divide into four cures of fever and other unspecified sickness; nine events in which he cures long-term disabilities (three with palsy or paralysis, crippled, or shriveled hand; two blind; one deaf/mute; one with abnormal swelling; one leper and later a group of ten lepers); six individuals who were possessed by demons; and three people brought back from death. The various types may overlap. The three who are brought back from death include the 12-year-old daughter a rich man whom the man thinks is dead, but Jesus tells him that she is not dead but asleep (Luke 8: 41–42, 49–56); a widow's son who is on his funeral bier, that is, recently pronounced dead (Luke 7: 11–17); and finally Lazarus (John 11: 1–46). Their illnesses are not described but could have been like the cases of fever in Jesus' other miracles.

The disabilities that Jesus cured also overlap with the individuals who are described as possessed by demons: One is "robbed of speech" and foams at the mouth (Mark 9: 14–29; Matthew 17: 14–21; Luke 9: 37–43); another has a mute demon and is also blind (Luke 11: 14–28; Mark 9: 32–34; Matthew 12: 22–37); another is vaguely described as a woman's daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit (Mark 7: 24–30; Matthew 14: 21–28). At least one of these appears to have epileptic fits. Another is a naked man who sleeps in tombs and has been chained up but breaks his chains (Luke 8: 26–39; Mark 5: 1–20; Matthew 8: 28–34). Casting out demons appears to be one of the most frequent things Jesus does; it is mentioned several times in summaries of his travels "preaching in synagogues and casting out demons" (Mark 1: 39) "many who were demon-possessed were brought to him" (Matthew 8: 16). This is a spiritual power that can be delegated; when his disciples are sent out on their own, they come back and report that "even the demons submit to us in your name." (Luke 10: 17; Matthew 10: 1).<sup>12</sup> One of Jesus' most fervent followers, Mary Magdalene, is described as having seven demons cast out (Luke 8: 2); possibly, this means that she went through the process seven times. She is also described as a prostitute, one of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the disciples fail in casting out a demon. In one case, the boy's father says that the spirit throws the boy to the ground, where he becomes rigid and foams at the mouth. When Jesus approaches, the boy goes into convulsions. The father says to Jesus, "If you can, take pity on us and help us." Jesus replies, "If you can? All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately, the boy's father exclaims, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." When Jesus sees a crowd running to the scene, he commands the spirit to leave the boy and never enter again. The spirit shrieks and convulses the boy violently. The boy looks so much like a corpse that many observers say that he is dead. But Jesus takes the boy's hand and lifts him to his feet, and the boy stands up (much like being raised from the dead). After Jesus has gone indoors, his disciples ask him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" Jesus replies, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9: 14–29). Jesus recognizes different kinds of cases and has more subtle techniques than his disciples have.

outcasts whom Jesus saves; we might think of her as having gone through several relapses or seeking the experience repeatedly (much like many Americans who undergo the “born again” experience more than once).

What does it mean to be possessed by a demon? A common denominator is some serious defect in the social act of speaking: either individuals who shout uncontrollably and in inappropriate situations, such as the man who shouts at Jesus in a synagogue, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1: 21–28), or individuals who are silent and will not speak at all. We could diagnose them today as having a physiological defect or as being mentally ill, psychotic, possibly schizophrenic. But in ancient society, there was no sharp distinction between sickness and mental illness. There were virtually no medical cures for sicknesses, and religious traditions regarded illness as punishment from God or the pagan gods; seriously ill people were left in temples and shrines, or shunted onto the margins of habitation. Left without care, without human sympathy, virtually without means of staying alive, they were true outcasts of society.

Here, we can apply modern sociology of mental illness and of physical sickness. As Talcott Parsons (1951) pointed out, there is a sick role that patients are expected to play; it is one’s duty to submit oneself to treatment, to put up with hospitals, and follow the authority of medical personnel, all premised on a social compact that this is done to make one well. But ancient society had no such role for a sick person; it was a passive and largely hopeless position. Goffman (1961, 1971), by doing fieldwork inside a mental hospital, concluded that the authoritarian and dehumanizing aspects of this total institution destroy what sense of personal autonomy the mental patient has left. Hence acting out—shouting, defecating in the wrong places, showing no modesty with one’s clothes, breaking the taboos of ordinary social life—are ways of rebelling against the system. The patients in such institutions are so deprived of normal social respect that the only things they can do to command attention are acts that degrade them still further. Demon-possessed individuals in the Bible act like Goffman’s mental patients, shouting or staying mute and disrupting normal social scenes.<sup>13</sup>

One gets the impression of a remarkable number of such demon-possessed—that is, acting-out—individuals in ancient Palestine.<sup>14</sup> They seem to be found in almost every village and social gathering. Many of them are curable by someone

---

<sup>13</sup> This research was done in the 1950s and 1960s, before the symptoms of mental patients were controlled by mood-altering drugs. The farther back we go in the history of mental illness, the more treatments resemble ancient practices of chaining, jailing, or expelling individuals who break taboos.

<sup>14</sup> A psychiatric survey of people living in New York City in the 1950s found that over 20 percent of the population had severe mental illness (Srole et al. 1962). It is likely that in ancient times, when stresses were greater, rates were even higher.

with Jesus' charismatic techniques of interaction. He pays attention to them, focusing on them wholly and steadily until they change their behavior and come back into normal human interaction; in every case that is described, Jesus is the first person in normal society with whom the bond is established. Each such individual acknowledges Jesus as his or her savior and wants to stay with him, but Jesus almost always sends them back, presumably into the community of Christian followers who will now see such cured individuals as emblems of the miracles that have been performed.

Notice that no one denies the existence of demons or denies that Jesus casts them out. When Jesus meets opposition (John 10: 19–21; Luke 11: 14–20), the language of demons is turned against him. Jesus himself, like others who speak in an unfamiliar or unwelcome voice, is accused of being demon-possessed. The same charge was made against John the Baptist, who resembled some demon-possessed individuals by living almost as a wild man in the wilderness. The difference is that John and Jesus can surround themselves with supportive crowds instead of being shunned by them.

Similarly, no one denies Jesus' medical miracles. The worst that his enemies, the religious law teachers and high priests, can accuse him of is the ritual violation of performing his cures on the Sabbath. This leads to Jesus' early confrontations with authority; he can point to his miracles to forcefully attack the elite as hypocrites, concerned only with their own ritually proper status but devoid of human sympathy.

Jesus' miracles are not unprecedented in the view of the people around him. Similar wonders are believed to have taken place in the past, and other textual sources on Hellenistic society refer to individuals known as curers and magicians. Jesus works in this cultural idiom. But he transforms it. He says repeatedly that it is not his power as a magician that causes the miracle, but the power of faith that people have in him and what he represents.

A Roman centurion pleads with Jesus to save his servant, who is sick and near death. The centurion calls Jesus "Lord" and says that he himself is not worthy that Jesus should come under his roof. But as a man of authority who can give orders to soldiers, the centurion recognizes that Jesus can say the word and his servant will be healed. Jesus says to the crowd, "I have not found such great faith even in Israel." The servant is then found to be cured (Luke 7: 1–10; Mark 8: 5–13).

In the midst of a thick crowd of people who are pressing to see Jesus, he feels someone touch him—not casually, but deliberately, seeking a cure. It is a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Jesus says, "I know that power has gone out from me." The woman comes trembling and falls at his feet. In the presence of the crowd, she tells Jesus why she has touched him and that she has been healed. Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace" (Luke 8: 43–48; Mark 5: 21–43; Matthew 9: 20–22).

While Jesus is passing through Jericho, a blind man in the crowd calls out to him repeatedly, although the crowd tells the man to be quiet. Jesus stops, has the man brought to him, and asks what the man wants from him. “Lord, I want to see,” he replies. Jesus says, “Receive your sight, for your faith has healed you” (Luke 18: 35–43; Mark 10: 46–52; Matthew 20: 29–34).

Failure to produce a miracle is explained as a failure of sufficient faith. In another version of the story of the demon-possessed boy, the disciples ask privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” Jesus replies, “Because you have so little faith. If you have faith, you can move mountains. Nothing is impossible for you” (Matthew 17: 19–20). The message is in the figurative language that Jesus habitually uses, the mastery of wordplay that makes him so dominant in interaction. The faith must be provided by his followers. When asked to perform a miracle—not because someone needs it, but as a proof of his power, a challenge to display a sign—Jesus refuses to do it (Luke 11: 29–32; Matthew 12: 38–39; 16: 1–4).

As Jesus’ career progresses, he becomes increasingly explicit that faith is the great end in itself. The goal of performing miracles is not to end physical pain or to gain into worldly success. Jesus is not a magician or conjurer. Magic, viewed by comparative sociology, is the use of spiritual power for worldly ends. For Jesus, it is the other way around. Healing miracles have an element of worldly altruism, since they are carried out for people who need them—but above all, the miracles are done for those who need to be brought back into the bonds of human sympathy. Miracles are a way of constituting the community, both in the specific sense of building the movement of his followers and in the more general sense of introducing a spirit of human sympathy throughout the world. Miracles happen in the enthusiasm of faith in the crowd, and that combination of moral and emotional experience is a foreshadowing of the kingdom of heaven as Jesus presents it.

Jesus’ logistics miracles consisted in taking a small amount of food or drink and multiplying it so that it becomes enough for large numbers of people. In the well-known incident of the loaves and fishes, a crowd of 5,000 have enough to eat, and many scraps are left over (Luke 9: 10–17; Matthew 14: 13–21; Mark 6: 30–44); in a similar situation, he started with seven loaves of bread and managed to feed 4,000 people with numerous baskets of broken pieces left over (Mark 8: 1–10). It has been suggested that the initial few fishes and loaves of bread were what the crowd first volunteered for the collective pot but that when Jesus started dividing them into equal pieces and passing them around, more and more people contributed from their private stocks (Zeitlin 1984). The miracle was an outpouring of public sharing. Jesus does something similar at a wedding party that is so crowded with guests that the wine jars are empty. He orders the jars to be filled with water, whereupon the crowd becomes even more intoxicated, commenting that unlike most feasts, the best wine was saved for last (John 2: 1–11). Possibly, the dregs of wine still in the casks gave the water some flavor and the enthusiasm

of the crowd did the rest. Partygoers will know that it is better to be drunk with the spirit of the occasion than sodden with too much alcohol.

Miracles show the power of the spirit, which is the power of faith that individuals have in the charismatic leader and his intensely focused community. Such experience is to be valued over anything in the world; it transcends ordinary life in the same way that religion in the full sense transcends magic.

The significance of miracles is not in a particular person who is cured but in providing a visible lesson in raising the wretched of the earth and awakening an altruistic conscience. After the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus says to a crowd that is following him eagerly, "You are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." They ask him, "What sign will you give that we may see it and believe you?" Jesus answers, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He goes on to talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, speaking in veiled language about the coming crucifixion. It causes a crisis in his movement: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6: 22–52). Those who wanted to take miracles literally were disappointed.

Jesus' nature miracles differ from the others in taking place not in crowds but among his intimate disciples. Here, the role of faith is highlighted but in a different sequence. Instead of faith being displayed by followers in the crowd, bringing about a healing miracle, Jesus produces miracles that have the effect of reassuring his followers.

A storm comes up while the twelve disciples are on a boat with Jesus on the weather-wracked Sea of Galilee. They are afraid of drowning, but Jesus is sleeping soundly. "Oh ye of little faith, why are you so afraid?" he admonishes them after they wake him up and the storm stills (Matthew 8: 23–27; Mark 4: 35–41; Luke 8: 22–25). Jesus is imperturbable, displaying a level of faith that his disciples do not yet have. In another instance, he sends his disciples out in a boat while he stays to dismiss the crowd and then to pray in solitude on the mountainside. The disciples are dismayed when the water grows rough and they cannot make headway with their oars. After a night of this, just before dawn, they are frightened when they perceive Jesus walking across the water, and some think that he is a ghost. Jesus calms them by saying, "It is I; don't be afraid." He boards the boat, and the wind dies down, allowing them finally to make it to shore (Mark 6: 45–52; John 6: 16–21). In one account, Peter says, "Lord if it is truly you, let me come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come," and Peter begins to walk. But he becomes afraid and begins to sink. Jesus immediately catches him with his hand, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14: 22–33).

The pattern for his disciples, who are supposed to show a higher level of faith, is that Jesus performs miracles when they feel in trouble without him.<sup>15</sup>

Apparitions, finally, are subjective experiences that particular people have at definite times and places. There is nothing sociological to question about their having such experiences, but we can notice who is present and what they did. The event called the Transfiguration happens when Jesus takes three close disciples up a mountain to pray—a special occasion, since he usually goes alone. The disciples see his face and clothes shining with light, witness historic personages talking to Jesus, and hear a voice from a cloud. The disciples fall to the ground, terrified until Jesus touches them and tells them not to be afraid, whereupon they see that Jesus is alone. Jesus admonishes them not to tell anyone about what they have seen (Luke 9: 28–30; Matthew 17: 1–13; Mark 9: 2–13).

When Jesus' mission in Jerusalem is building toward the final confrontation between his own followers and increasingly hostile authorities and their crowds, Jesus announces that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” A voice from heaven says, “I have glorified it.” Some in the crowd say that the voice thundered; others say that an angel spoke. Jesus tells them that the vision is for their benefit, not his, and that “you will have the light only a little while longer.” When he finishes speaking, he hides from the crowd (John 12: 20–36). The crowd is not of one mind; they disagree about whether or not Jesus is the Messiah who will rule and remain forever, while Jesus sees the political wind blowing toward his execution. The subjective feeling of a thunderous voice in the crowd, but variously interpreted, reflects what was going on at this dramatic moment.

Finally, I will venture an interpretation of what happens when Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4: 1–11; Luke 4: 1–13). After hearing John the Baptist preaching about the coming Son of God, Jesus must have decided that he was the one. The next thing he does is to imitate John the Baptist by going to live alone in the desert. Here, he has apparitions of the devil (which we read about presumably because he later told his disciples). Living in the desert for forty days is a life-threatening ordeal, and at some point, Jesus considers that he has the power to turn stones into food. He rejects this as a thought that comes from the

---

<sup>15</sup> Other miracles occur on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus recruits Simon and Andrew by first preaching from their boat, then pushing off from shore, whereupon they make a huge catch of fish (Luke 5: 1–11). Another time, Jesus responds to a tax demand by telling Peter to fish in the lake, where he will catch a fish with a coin in its mouth to pay their taxes (Matthew 17: 24–27). At the end of the miracle of curing a demon-possessed man, Jesus sends the demons into a nearby herd of swine (which are presumably polluted under Jewish law), whereupon the swine rush madly off a cliff and drown themselves in the lake (Luke 8: 26–39; Mark 5: 1–20; Matthew 8: 28–34). One nature miracle happens on dry land: On his way into Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, Jesus curses a fig tree that has no fruit for him and his followers; when he returns in the evening, the tree has withered (Mark 11: 15–19; Matthew 21: 18–21). The miracle is a living parable on the withered-up ritualists whom Jesus is attacking.

devil, since his aim is not to be a magician. The internal dialogue ends with the kind of aphorism that Jesus would pronounce throughout his mission: “Man shall not live by bread alone.” Up on the mountain cliffs, he considers whether to jump down and fly, but he rejects that too; it is another devil temptation to use magic for trivial marvels, as in the entertaining stories in the *Arabian Nights*. Jesus envisions the devil showing him the whole world spread out below and giving him the evil thought that the Kingdom of God would make him the mightiest of worldly kings. Modern research shows that internal dialogue takes place not only through talk but also as visual images taking their turn in the internal argument (Collins 2004; Wiley 1994). Through these apparitions, Jesus is thinking out what kind of power he has and what he will do with it. It is the power to inspire crowds, to recruit followers, to work a moral revolution and reveal a life goal that is not of the world as people hitherto knew it. It is, in short, the power of charisma.

#### REFERENCES

- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Randall. 2014. “Really Bad Family Values; With an Historical Explanation of the Oedipus Complex.” *The Sociological Eye*. Available at [sociological-eye.blogspot.com/2014/03/really-bad-family-values-with.html](http://sociological-eye.blogspot.com/2014/03/really-bad-family-values-with.html).
- Durkheim, Emile. 1912/1965. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Joseph Ward Swain. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1971. “The Insanity of Place.” In *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, 335–390. New York: Basic Books.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1951. *The Social System*. New York: Free Press.
- Srole, Leo. Thomas S. Langner, Stanley T. Michael, Marvin K. Opler, and Thomas A. C. Rennie. 1962. *Mental Health in the Metropolis*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stark, Rodney. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wiley, Norbert. 1994. *The Semiotic Self*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zeitlin, Irving. 1984. *Ancient Judaism: Biblical Criticism from Max Weber to the Present*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.