

# JESUS MOVEMENTS AND THE RENEWAL OF ISRAEL

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CHAPTER ONE

The Middle Eastern peasants who formed the first movement that focused on Yeshua bar Yosef (whom we know as Jesus) eked out a living farming and fishing in a remote region of the Roman Empire. At the outset their movement was similar in form and circumstances to many others that arose among people of Israelite heritage. Their families and village communities were steadily disintegrating under the increasing pressures of offerings to the Jerusalem Temple, taxes to Herodian kings, and tribute to their Roman conquerors. Large numbers of Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean peasants eagerly responded to the pronouncements of peasant prophets that God was again about to liberate them from their oppressive rulers and restore cooperative community life under the traditional divine principles of justice. The other movements ended abruptly when the Roman governors sent out the military and slaughtered them. The movements that formed around Yeshua bar Yosef, however, survived the Roman crucifixion of their leader as a rebel “king.” In fact, his martyrdom became a powerful impetus for the expansion and diversification of his movements.

To understand the earliest Jesus movements in genuinely historical terms requires some serious rethinking of standard assumptions and approaches in conventional New Testament studies, which developed as a foundation for Christian theology. Standard interpretation of the Gospels in particular focuses on Jesus as an individual figure or on the Christology of one of the Gospels. It is simply assumed that the Gospels and other scriptural books are religious and that Jesus and the Gospels were pivotal in the origin of the new, universal, and



Fig. 1.1. Map of Palestine in the first century CE.

truly spiritual religion, “Christianity,” from the old, parochial, and overly political religion, “Judaism.” In the ancient world in which the Gospels originated, however, religion was not separated from political-economic life. In fact, at the time of Jesus there was no such thing yet as a religion called Judaism, judging from our sources such as the Gospels, the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the contemporary Judean historian Josephus. Similarly, something that could intelligibly be called Christianity had not developed until late antiquity, well after the time when the books that were later included in the New Testament and related literature were composed by leaders associated with the movements focused on Jesus.

It makes sense to begin from the broader historical conditions of life under the Roman Empire that constituted the historical context of Jesus’ mission and to focus first on the many other Judean, Samaritan, and Galilean movements that illuminate the form of the earliest Jesus movements.

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## **POPULAR RESISTANCE AND RENEWAL UNDER ROMAN IMPERIAL RULE**

The ancient world was divided fundamentally between rulers and ruled, in culture as well as in political-economic structure. A tiny percentage of wealthy and powerful families lived comfortably in the cities from the tithes, taxes, tribute, and interest that they extracted from the vast majority of people, who lived in villages and worked the land. We must thus first examine the historical dynamics of that fundamental societal division in order to understand the circumstances in which the early Jesus movements formed and expanded.

At the time of Jesus, the people of Israelite heritage who lived in the southeast corner of the Mediterranean world, Judea in the south, Galilee in the north, and Samaria in between, lived under the rule of Rome. A Roman army had conquered the area about sixty years before Jesus’ birth. The Romans installed the military strongman Herod as their client king to control the area. He in turn kept in place the Temple and high priesthood. The temple-state and its high priestly aristocracy had been set up by the Persian imperial regime centuries earlier as an instrument of their rule in Judea, the district around the



**Fig. 1.2.** Judean silver shekel, from the time of the first Jewish revolt against the Romans (66–70 CE). Obverse shows a chalice and the Hebrew inscription “year 2,” “shekel of Israel”; reverse shows pomegranates and the inscription “Jerusalem the Holy.” The minting of coins was itself an act of rebellion against Rome. Israel Museum, Jerusalem; photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

city of Jerusalem. Subsequent imperial regimes retained this political-economic-religious arrangement for the control of the area and collection of revenues. With the decline of Hellenistic imperial power, the Hasmonean high priests extended Jerusalem’s rule over Idumea to the south and Samaria and Galilee to the north, little more than a century before the birth of Jesus. After the Roman conquest, however, the high priestly aristocracy at the head of the temple-state in Jerusalem was again dependent on the favor of the imperial regime. Dependent, in turn, on the favor of the high priesthood were the professional scribal groups (such as the Pharisees) that worked for the priestly aristocracy as administrators of the temple-state and custodians of the cultural traditions, traditional laws, and religious rituals in which its legitimacy was articulated.

The old construct of a monolithic Judaism glosses over the fundamental division and multiple conflicts that persisted for centuries in Judean and Galilean history. Conflicts between rival factions in the priestly aristocracy, who competed for imperial favor, and the corresponding factions among scribal circles came to a head in the Maccabean Revolt of the 160s BCE. Further conflict developed as the Maccabean military strongmen consolidated their power as the new high priestly regime. The groups known as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, whom we now understand to have been closely related to the Qumran community that left the Dead Sea Scrolls, cannot be understood in early modern terms as sects of Judaism. They were rather rival scribal factions or parties who competed for influence on the high priestly regimes or, in the case of the Essenes, withdrew into the wilderness when they lost out.

The history of Judea and Galilee in the two centuries preceding and the century immediately after Jesus’ mission, however, was driven by the persistent conflict between the peasantry and their local and imperial rulers. In fact, according to our principal sources for these centuries—such as the books of the Maccabees, the *Jewish War* and the *Antiquities of the Jews* by the Judean historian Josephus, and later rabbinic literature—it was actions by Judean and Galilean peasants that drove most of the major historical events. The period of history around the time of Jesus was framed by four major peasant revolts: the Maccabean revolt in the 160s BCE, the revolt at the death of Herod

in 4 BCE, the great revolt against Roman rule from 66 to 70 CE, and the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–35 CE. In the immediate period of Jesus' mission and the first generation of Jesus movements, furthermore, peasants and ordinary people in Jerusalem mounted numerous protests and formed a number of renewal and resistance movements, most of which the Romans suppressed with brutal military action. Almost all of these revolts, protests, and movements were directed both against the foreign imperial rule of the Romans and against the Herodian and high priestly rulers in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

Such popular revolts are rare in most areas of the world and periods of history. In response to their perpetual subjection to exploitative practices of the elite, peasants regularly engage in hidden forms of resistance, such as sequestering portions of their crops before the tax collectors arrive. Peasants generally do not mount serious revolts, unless their backs are against the wall or they are utterly outraged at their treatment by their rulers. They do, however, organize vocal protests against their conditions and treatment.

We can see the remarkable level of organization and discipline that popular protests were capable of generating in the strike against the emperor Caligula mounted by Galilean peasants a few years after Jesus' mission there (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.269–84). Gaius Caligula, incensed that diaspora Jews refused to render him divine honors, ordered his statue installed in the Jerusalem Temple by military force. As the military expedition prepared to march through Galilee, large numbers of peasants organized a strike, refusing to plant the crops. The Roman Legate of Syria as well as the Herodian officers in control of Galilee knew well that they faced the prospect of a “harvest of banditry” instead of the crops on which their expropriation of tribute depended. Gaius's timely death prevented an escalation of the conflict. Clearly, Galilean and Judean people were capable of mounting serious widespread protests and other movements of resistance.

As the Galilean peasant strike illustrates, most of the widespread peasant revolts, urban protests, and popular renewal-resistance movements were rooted in and inspired by Israelite tradition. The central social memories of the origin and formation of Israel as an independent people focused on their liberation from foreign rule of the pharaoh in Egypt and on their Covenant on Sinai with their true,

divine king (God), to the exclusion of oppressive human rulers (“no gods other than me”; “no images”). Judeans’ and Galileans’ loyalty to these formative traditions shaped their very identity as a people and led them to oppose foreign and Jerusalem rulers who conquered them and interfered with their community life directly under the covenantal rule of God.

Perhaps the most vivid example is the Passover celebration of the exodus from foreign oppression in Egypt. Jerusalem rulers had long since centralized this celebration in Jerusalem so that it would associate the formative memory and identity of Israel as a people with the Temple and its priesthood. Celebration of the exodus by pilgrims to Jerusalem, however, became a time of heightened awareness of their own subjection by the Romans and intense yearning to be independent again, in accordance with God’s will and previous deliverance. In response to regular outbreaks of protest at festival time, the Roman governors made a habit of posting Roman soldiers on the porticoes of the Temple courtyard to intimidate the Passover crowds. But that merely exacerbated the intensity of popular feeling. Under the governor Cumanus at mid-first century, the crowds burst into a massive riot, provoked by a lewd gesture by a Roman soldier—and were slaughtered by the troops (*War* 2.223–26; *Ant.* 20.105–12).<sup>2</sup>

Most distinctive and widespread resistance and renewal efforts among the Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean people were the popular messianic movements and the popular prophetic movements. The many movements that took one or the other of these two distinctively Israelite forms are surely most important in understanding why the Galilean and Judean peoples, more than all others subjected by the Romans, persisted in mounting repeated resistance against Roman rule. These movements are most important for understanding the social forms taken by the Jesus movements. Both the popular prophetic movements and the popular messianic movements were following distinctively Israelite “scripts” based on memories of God’s original acts of deliverance led by the great prophets Moses and Joshua or by the young David as the people’s “messiah.” Memories of these founding events were still alive in villager communities, ready to inform the people’s collective action in circumstances of social crisis.<sup>3</sup>

When Herod finally died in 4 BCE, after a long and intensely oppressive rule over the people he had conquered with the aid of Roman troops, widespread revolts erupted in nearly every district of his realm (*War* 2.56–75; *Ant.* 17.271–85). In Galilee, Perea across the Jordan River, and Judea itself, these revolts were led by figures whose followers acclaimed them king, according to Josephus. They attacked the royal fortresses and storehouses, “taking back” the goods that had been seized and stored there, and they raided Roman baggage trains. In Galilee the movement led by Judas, son of the famous brigand-chief Hezekias, was suppressed within a few months, with great slaughter and destruction in the general area around Nazareth—shortly before Jesus came to live and grow up there. In Judea the movement led by the strapping shepherd Athronges and his brothers managed to maintain the people’s independence in the Judean hill country for three years. Roman troops were finally able to ferret it out, again with much slaughter and the crucifixion of thousands as a means of terrorizing the people into submission.

Again in the middle of the great revolt of 66–70 CE, Judean peasants acclaimed Simon bar Giora as king (*War* 2.652–53; 4.503–34, 574–78; 7.29–36, 153–55). The Romans having been temporarily driven out, he moved around the countryside in the area of Hebron, where the young David had gotten his start. He liberated (debt-) slaves, restored people’s property, and in general effected justice for the people. Having amassed a peasant army of thousands, he entered Jerusalem, joining other forces from other areas of the countryside that had taken refuge in the fortresslike city to resist the inevitable Roman reconquest. After being captured in the Roman reconquest of the city, Simon was taken in chains to Rome. There he was formally executed as the vanquished enemy general (the “king of the Judeans”) by the emperor Vespasian and his son Titus in the lavish celebration of their glorious triumph.

All of these movements appear to have been patterned after the messianic movement led centuries earlier by the young David. As the Philistines continued their attacks against the Israelite peasantry, the people acclaimed David as their messiah-king (2 Sam. 2:1-4; 5:1-4) to lead them against the oppressive foreign rulers and to reestablish justice among the people. In his accounts of the movements in 4 BCE and 66–70 CE, Josephus does not use the term “messiah” (“anointed”),

probably because he was writing for a Greek-speaking audience. But if we translate his accounts back into the Hebrew-Aramaic culture of Judea and Galilee, these movements must be understood as messianic movements patterned after the liberating revolts led by David and other popularly acclaimed messiah-kings in formative Israelite tradition.

That several such messianic movements emerged a generation before and a generation after the time of Jesus' mission is significant when we recognize that literature produced by the Judean scribal elite rarely mentions a messiah. This is in sharp contrast to previous Christian understanding, according to which the Jews were eagerly expecting *the* Messiah to lead them against foreign rule. But as scholars finally began to recognize about forty years ago, there was no such job description just waiting for Jesus to fulfill (in his own way). The Judean elite, of course, would not have been interested, since their positions of power and privilege depended on the Romans, who appointed oppressive kings such as Herod. Perhaps it was against just such an illegitimate king set in power by the Romans that the memory of the popularly acclaimed messiah-king David and other popular kings was revived among the Judean and Galilean peasantry and came to life in numerous movements for the independence and renewal of Israel right around the time of Jesus.

After the revolt led by Judas, son of Hezekias (4 BCE), this Israelite cultural "script" of a popular messianic movement would certainly have been alive in the area around Nazareth, the very area in which Jesus supposedly grew up. And its brutal suppression by the Romans would have left a collective social trauma of villages pillaged and burned and family members slaughtered and enslaved by the Romans. Such historical events and cultural memories cannot have been without their effect on popular life in Nazareth and other Galilean and Judean villages.

In another distinctively Israelite form, a number of popular movements led by prophets in anticipation of new acts of deliverance by God appeared in mid-first century. According to the ever hostile Josephus, "Impostors and demagogues, under the guise of divine inspiration, provoked revolutionary actions and impelled the masses to act like madmen. They led them out into the wilderness so that there God would show them signs of imminent liberation" (*War* 2.259), and



“For they said that they would display unmistakable signs and wonders done according to God’s plan” (*Ant.* 20.168).

The first of these movements led by prophets was among the Samaritans (circa 36 CE). A prophet led a crowd up to Mount Gerizim, the most sacred mountain, promising that they would recover the holy vessels from the tabernacle of the formative exodus-wilderness experience of Israel, buried at the spot where Moses had put them. But the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, dispatched cavalry as well as infantry, killed some, took many prisoner, and executed the leaders (*Ant.* 18.85–87).

Perhaps the most famous prophetic movement was led about a decade later (circa 45 CE) by Theudas, who “persuaded most of the common people to take their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He said he was a prophet, and that at his command the river would be divided and allow them an easy crossing. . . . A cavalry unit killed many in a surprise attack [and] having captured Theudas, cut off his head and carried it up to Jerusalem” (*Ant.* 20.97–98; also mentioned in the Book of Acts 5:36). About another decade later (56 CE), just prior to Paul’s visit to Jerusalem after his mission in Corinth, Ephesus, and Macedonia, a Jewish prophet from Egypt rallied many thousands in the countryside. He led them up to the Mount of Olives, opposite Jerusalem, declaring that the walls of the city would fall down and the Roman garrison would be overpowered, giving them entry into the city. The Roman governor Felix, with heavily armed cavalry and infantry, killed hundreds of them, before the prophet himself and the others escaped (*Ant.* 20.169–71; *War* 2.261–63).

As with the messianic movements, so these prophetic movements were peasant movements clearly patterned after formative events in



**Fig. 1.3.** The hill of Gamla, in Israel. Fortified by Josephus during the First Jewish revolt, the town finally fell to Vespasian’s troops in 67 CE. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Israelite tradition. In the general characterization by Josephus (who called those who performed signs of liberation in the wilderness “prophets”) and in the case of Theudas, who told his followers to take their goods along and expected the waters to be divided, these figures stepped into the role of a new Moses (or Joshua), leading a new exodus (or entry into the land, which had been more or less collapsed with the exodus in popular memory). The Judean prophet from Egypt patterned his role and the anticipated divine act of deliverance after Joshua’s leadership of Israel in taking over their land from oppressive kings in their fortified cities, particularly the battle of Jericho. Judging from the terms used in Josephus’s hostile accounts, these prophets and their followers were acting under inspiration.

The most noteworthy aspect of these movements to the ruling elite, of course, was the threat they posed to the imperial order. Josephus says that they were out to make “revolutionary changes.” The Israelite traditions they were imitating, the exodus led by Moses and the entry into their own land led by Joshua, moreover, suggest that these movements anticipated a restoration of the people as well as a liberation from alien rule. Given our limited sources, of course, we have no indication of how they imagined the future of an Israel again living in independence of foreign domination. Although Josephus claims that the Samaritans were armed, his accounts of the others suggest that, unarmed, they were acting in anticipation of God’s action to deliver them. The Roman governors, however, saw them as serious threats to the imperial order and sent out the troops to crush them and kill their prophetic leaders.

In all of these protests and movements the ordinary people of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea were taking bold action, often involving considerable organization and discipline, in making history. The people, facing acute economic distress and a disintegrating political order, took control of their own lives, under the leadership of popular kings (messiahs) like Judas ben Hezekias or popular prophets such as Theudas. These movements of social renewal and political resistance put the Roman and Jerusalem rulers on the defensive. The peasants were challenging the Roman imperial order! In response, the Roman governors, along with the Jerusalem high priesthood in some cases, took brutal, sometimes massive military action, often symbolically

decapitating or ceremonially executing the prophetic or messianic leader.

Most striking is how, with the exception of epidemic banditry, these protests and movements took distinctively Israelite social forms. The protests were driven by outrage at the violation of traditional Mosaic covenantal principles. Both the messianic movements and the prophetic movements were decisively informed by (or patterned after) social memories deeply embedded in Israelite tradition. That there were so many of these movements that took one or another of two basic social forms strongly suggests that these distinctive cultural memories, these “scripts” for movements of renewal and resistance, were very much alive in the village communities of the peoples of Israelite heritage in Palestine around the time of Yeshua bar Yosef.

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## THE EARLIEST JESUS MOVEMENTS

It is in precisely this context of persistent conflict between the Judean and Galilean peasantry and their Jerusalem and Roman rulers that we must understand the origins and development of the earliest Jesus movements. Given how prominent the popular prophetic and messianic movements were in the immediate historical context, moreover, we might expect that the earliest movements that formed in response to Jesus’ mission would exhibit some similar features and patterns.

Several closely interrelated factors in the traditional Christian theological scheme of Christian origins, however, have worked to isolate Jesus from his historical context, even to keep Jesus from having any direct relation to Jesus movements. First, since he was supposedly a unique person and revealer, Jesus is treated as separate from the social roles and political-economic relationships in which historical figures are usually engaged. Second, rather than being read as complete stories, the Gospels have been taken merely as containers in which to find individual sayings. Jesus’ sayings are then understood as artifacts that have meaning in themselves, rather than as genuine communication with other people in historical social contexts. Third, Jesus is viewed as a revealer, separated from the formation of a movement in the context of the village communities in which people lived.

Not Jesus himself but the disciples were supposedly the ones who established a community—in Jerusalem after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, from which they then founded “churches” in Judea and beyond.

The net effect of these interrelated factors of theologically determined New Testament interpretation is a combination of assumptions and procedures that would be unacceptable in the regular investigation of history. When historians investigate popular movements and their leaders (for example, the civil rights movement and its leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.), they consider multiple contextual and relational factors.<sup>4</sup> Since there are no leaders without followers and no movements without leadership, *leader-follower interaction* is central. Leader and movement would not emerge in the first place, moreover, unless there were a *problematic historical situation*. Yet we do not understand why the leader and followers who form a movement find their situation intolerable unless we know something of the previous *historical developments* that led to the problems. And we cannot understand why they found the situation intolerable unless we have a sense of their cultural values. Indeed, we cannot understand how and why the leader’s message and program resonate with followers such that they form a movement without a sense of the *cultural traditions and values* that provide the media in which they communicate.

To investigate the earliest Jesus movements, including possible similarities with contemporary Galilean and Judean movements, we will follow just such a relational and contextual approach—simply bypassing the problematic assumptions, approaches, and concepts of previous New Testament interpretation. We will focus mainly on what are by consensus the earliest Gospel sources, the Gospel of Mark and the sequence of Jesus speeches that appear in closely parallel versions in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, and known as Q (for *Quelle*, the German word for “source”).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Agenda**

Both of the earliest Gospel texts, Mark and Q, represent Jesus and followers as a prophet-led movement engaged in the renewal of Israel that condemns and is condemned by the Jerusalem (and Roman) rulers.<sup>6</sup>

The people who produced and used the sequence of Jesus speeches that is called Q understand Jesus as—and themselves as the beneficiaries of—the figure whose activities fulfilled their yearnings for a prophet who would heal and bind up the people and preach good news to the poor (Q/Luke 7:18-35). They even see his exorcisms as manifestation of a new exodus, done “by the finger of God,” a clear allusion to Moses’ divinely empowered performances in the exodus (Q 11:14-20). In the longest speech of Q (6:20-49), moreover, Jesus speaks as the new Moses, enacting a renewal of the covenant as the guiding principles for cooperation and solidarity in community relations. Jesus’ speech sending envoys out into villages indicates that the movement of renewal of Israel is expanding by sending delegates to more and more village communities. In speeches that take the distinctively Israelite form of prophetic woes and oracles, Jesus pronounces divine condemnation of the Jerusalem rulers and their representatives. He pronounces a series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees and prophetic oracles of lament over the aristocracy who presume on their lineage, the Jerusalem ruling house (Q 11:39-52; 13:28-29, 34-35). The speeches heard by the Q people thus represent Jesus as the latest in the long line of Israelite prophets to be killed by the oppressive rulers.

The people who produced and used Mark’s Gospel had an even more vivid sense of Jesus, his disciples, and themselves as engaged in a renewal of Israel against, and under attack by, the Jerusalem and Roman rulers. Jesus called and commissioned the Twelve as the representative heads of the twelve tribes of Israel as well as disciples who extend his mission of renewing Israel in village communities. The hearers of Mark’s story resonated to the clear allusions to the origins of Israel under Moses and the renewal of Israel led by Elijah in the sequences of sea-crossings, exorcisms, healings, and wilderness feedings in the middle of the Gospel (3:35—8:29). That a renewal of Israel is under way is confirmed by the disciples’ vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah on the mountain. And in a series of dialogues (Mark 10:2-45) Jesus presents Torah-like instruction to the communities of his followers, teaching that constitutes a renewed Mosaic covenant, indicated by the recitation of the covenantal commandments. After he marched up into Jerusalem with his entourage, he had condemned the Temple itself in a forcible demonstration reminiscent of Jeremiah’s

famous pronouncement that God would destroy the Temple because of the rulers' oppressive practices (Mark 11; Jeremiah 7 and 26). Finally, just before he was arrested, tried, and executed by the Romans, Jesus celebrated the Passover at the "last supper," a meal that renewed the Mosaic covenant with the Twelve representatives of Israel, and announced that the cup was "my blood of the covenant" (an allusion to the original covenant meal (Exodus 24)).

Mark and Q are different in overall literary form, the one a complex story in a sequence of episodes, the other a series of speeches on different issues. They appear, moreover, to have been produced and used by different communities or movements. Yet they both represent Jesus as a Moses- and Elijah-like prophet engaged in the renewal of Israel in its village communities and pronouncing prophetic condemnations of the Jerusalem Temple, its high priestly rulers, and its Pharisaic representatives. That the two earliest Gospel sources, so different from one another in form, share this portrayal of Jesus as leader of a movement suggests the same role and relationship with followers at the origin of the respective communities or movements. Within the overall agenda shared by both texts, we will focus our investigation on a few key aspects of both movements: the sending of workers on the mission of building and expanding the movement, covenant renewal, and persecution by hostile authorities.

Before moving to those key aspects, however, we may note some distinctive features of Mark and Q that seem to distinguish their communities from other movements of Jesus followers. Mark appears to be setting its movement's identity off against the Jerusalem community headed by Peter and others of the Twelve. The story portrays the disciples as increasingly misunderstanding Jesus' mission and, in the crisis in Jerusalem, betraying, denying, and abandoning him. Mark represents Jesus' role as in a sense patterned after a messianic role in addition to his dominant prophetic role. Yet the narrative qualifies and criticizes the messianic role in decisive ways. Mark also downplays Jesus' resurrection so seriously that it is merely instrumental to calling the hearers of the story back up to Galilee to continue the movement that Jesus had started. The Q speeches indicate no knowledge of a resurrection at all. Jesus' death is understood as the climax of the long line of prophets killed by the rulers. And Q's

Jesus demonstrates virtually no messianic traits in his dominantly prophetic agenda.

In these ways and more Mark's story and the Q speeches appear to address movements that originated in Galilee and spread into the bilingual villages of nearby areas (Aramaic and Greek). They are both different from other communities or movements of Jesus loyalists, such as the Jerusalem community known from Acts and the assemblies that Paul addresses in his letters. Before we explore these earliest sources and Jesus movements, however, it makes sense to have a more precise sense of the historical conditions in which the Jesus movements developed.

### **Conditions in Galilee<sup>7</sup>**

Galileans were people of Israelite heritage. They shared with their more southerly cousins in Judea and Samaria the formative traditions of Israel. Most basic were stories of the exodus led by the prophet Moses, celebrated annually in the Passover, and of Israel's covenant with its divine king mediated through Moses on Sinai. Memories of northern Israelite prophets such as Elijah and Elisha would also presumably have been particularly prominent in Galilee.

Galilee, however, had recently come under Jerusalem rule, about a hundred years before Jesus' birth, after being under separate imperial jurisdiction for hundreds of years. During the lifetime of Jesus, Galilee was again placed under separate imperial jurisdiction, no longer under rule by the Jerusalem temple-state. Galileans thus may well have been ambivalent about Jerusalem rule. On the one hand, they were again reunited with others of Israelite heritage, which could well have generated a revival of Israelite traditions. On the other hand, they may not have been overly eager to pay tithes and offerings to the Temple in addition to the taxes demanded by King Herod and the tribute taken by Rome.

Moreover, in Galilee more than in Judea there would have been a discrepancy between the Judean-Israelite "great tradition" cultivated by scribal circles in Jerusalem, partly embodied in the scrolls of the Pentateuch, and the "little" or popular Israelite tradition cultivated in village communities.<sup>8</sup> When the Jerusalem high priesthood took over

Galilee, they imposed “the laws of the Judeans” (presumably including the Pentateuch) on the inhabitants. It is difficult to imagine that a century of Jerusalem rule provided sufficient time for Galilean peasants, who lived largely in semi-independent village communities, to assimilate much from the official “laws of the Judeans”—even if they were being pushed on the people by scribal and Pharisaic representatives of the temple-state. The only close contemporary evidence we have, Josephus’s accounts of the great revolt in 66–67, indicates that collective actions by Galileans were motivated by their adherence to the basic principles of the Mosaic covenant, and these accounts give no evidence for Galilean acquaintance with laws in the Pentateuch.<sup>9</sup>

The Galilean people eagerly asserted their independence of both Jerusalem and Roman rule at every opportunity. After the Romans imposed Herod as “king of the Judeans” in 40 BCE, Galileans repeatedly resisted his attempts to control their territory (*War* 1.304–16, 326; *Ant.* 14.415–33, 450). When Herod died in 4 BCE, peasants in the area around Nazareth, having acclaimed Judas ben Hezekiah their king, attacked the royal fortress in Sepphoris (*War* 2.56; *Ant.* 17.271). Seventy years later, at the beginning of the great revolt, the peasants quickly asserted their independence of their rulers. In western Galilee they periodically attacked the city of Sepphoris, which remained loyal to the Romans. In eastern Galilee they repeatedly resisted attempts to bring them under control, whether by the Herodian officers in Tiberias or by Josephus, who had been delegated by the provisional high priestly regime in Jerusalem (Josephus recounts these events in his *Life*).

The Roman imposition of Herod Antipas following the revolt in 4 BCE meant that for the first time the ruler of Galilee was located in Galilee itself and not at a considerable distance. The location of the administration within view of nearly every village meant greater efficiency in tax collection. That efficiency and Antipas’s need for extraordinary revenues to underwrite the huge expense of building two capital cities, Tiberias as well as Sepphoris, must have exacerbated the economic burden on the peasant producers. Both cities, built in Roman style by a ruler who had been educated in Rome, must have seemed like alien urban society set down into the previously Israelite rural landscape remote from the dominant high culture.



With peasant families forced into escalating debt in order to pay taxes and still support themselves, village communities were threatened with disintegration. There is simply no solid evidence to support the romantic notion of the last generation that Jesus attracted primarily the marginalized members of society, such as “sinners” and prostitutes or rootless individuals who had abandoned their lands and families. Evidence for economic conditions and land tenure in Palestine at the time of Jesus suggests that peasants in the hill country of western Judea had indeed been losing their lands to wealthy Herodian landlords. By contrast, that Herodian officers in Galilee had their estates on the east side of the Jordan River suggests that villagers in Galilee were still on their ancestral lands.<sup>10</sup> Mark and Q themselves, moreover, represent Jesus as engaging the poor peasantry in general. The frequent attention to debts and their cancellation point to an audience still on the land but unable to make ends meet, given the demands for taxes and tribute. The people available for hire as day laborers in some of Jesus’ parables were previously assumed to be landless laborers. But those looking for work in a society such as Galilee were more likely villagers who needed to supplement the dwindling subsistence living they were still eking out on their land or peasants working off debts. And as studies of peasant revolts have found, it is villagers in just such circumstances who tend to become involved in popular movements and revolts. On the other hand, those who have already lost their land become heavily dependent on wealthy elite families or their agents and hence are less free to join movements.

### **Mission**

Our earliest Gospel sources offer a number of indications that a movement developed and expanded in Galilee and areas beyond, catalyzed by and focused on Jesus. These indicators come into focus once we cut through previous assumptions regarding Judaism and Christianity that turn out to be historically unfounded.

In contrast to the portrayal of Paul in Acts as founding a new *ekklesia* (“assembly”) as a counterpart to the Jewish *synagoge* (“assembly”), in Galilean, Judean, or Syrian villages it was not necessary to form new

communities. As in most agrarian societies, the fundamental form of societal life in Galilee and Syria was the village community, comprised of a larger or smaller number of households. The latter were the basic productive and reproductive unit, while village communities had mechanisms for mutual cooperation and aid to help maintain each household as a viable multigenerational unit in the community.

The speeches in both Q and Mark's story portray Jesus and his disciples as developing a movement based in village communities. In Q, the covenant renewal discourse (6:20-49), which addresses local social-economic relations, makes sense only in the context of local communities. The Lord's prayer, with its mutual cancellation of debts, and the discourse on anxiety (11:2-4, 9-13; 12:22-31) also presuppose village communities. Mark's story, moreover, has Jesus repeatedly teaching and healing in villages or "towns" and "places." Most significant, surely, is how Mark's story, almost in passing (as if it would be obvious), has Jesus and his envoys carrying out their teaching and healing in the village *assemblies*. The Greek term *synagoge*, like the Hebrew and Aramaic *kneset* in rabbinic texts, meant "assembly." In the Gospels and in most references in contemporary Judean texts it refers to the local village assembly. According to later rabbinic texts, these village assemblies met twice a week (compare the community fasts mentioned in the *Didache* 8:1). As the religious-political form of local cooperation and self-governance of the semi-independent village communities, the assemblies dealt with common concerns such as the water supply and held community prayers and discussions.<sup>11</sup>

Independently, Mark (6:6-13) and Q (10:2-16) both have Jesus deliver a speech that commissions workers to assist in the program of extending the movement (of renewing Israel) to other village communities.<sup>12</sup> That these "discourses" exhibit the same basic structure, with different wording, suggests that such sending of Jesus envoys was a standard practice in the earliest phases of the Jesus movements. In both versions of the commissioning, the workers are sent out in pairs to other villages where they were to stay with, and accept subsistence support from, a household in the community. Given the small houses and crowded conditions known from archaeological excavations (several houses of two rooms roughly six feet by nine feet off central courtyards), we can assume they were not working with individual

families, but wider village communities. Charged to expand Jesus' own mission of preaching and healing, these workers were apparently also, in effect, carrying out what might be called community organizing. The expectation, surely based on experience, was that a whole village might be receptive or hostile. In the former case it apparently became associated with the wider movement. In the latter, curses might be called down upon it for its rejection of the opportunity offered: "Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida!"<sup>13</sup>

In this connection we should follow up the few clues Mark gives about how the most prominent leaders of the movement—Peter, James, and John—may have come from a somewhat different personal and familial situation from the villagers among whom they built the movement. Their fishing enterprise involved the collaborative effort of several men.<sup>14</sup> Herod Antipas, needing to expand his revenues in order to fund his ambitious city-building, developed fishing into an industry. Working through brokers as intermediaries, the king supplied the equipment, especially the costly large (twenty-six-foot) boats that required a crew of five or six (compare the size of boat required in Jesus' sea-crossings in Mark). Collaborative crews evidently contracted to deliver a certain percentage or amount of their catch to the processing depots in return for keeping the rest (somewhat like sharecroppers). The principal processing center for the fish was the burgeoning boomtown of Magdala, "tower of fish" in Aramaic, where people cut loose from their ancestral lands and village communities found work. We might speculate also that the Mary known as "from Magdala," evidently an independent woman (not identified by her attachment to either father or husband), may have been such a destitute person cut loose from her family of origin.

Cross-cultural studies suggest that it is precisely such people with experience beyond a village and contact with outsiders who tend to become leaders in movements of renewal or resistance. Some of the principal leaders of the Jesus movements were apparently "downwardly mobile" people with direct experience of indebtedness to



**Fig. 1.4.** "Peter's House," ruins of a modest first- or early-second-century house in Capernaum, Israel. Capernaum was one of several densely populated towns surrounding Lake Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee) and figures prominently in the accounts of Jesus and his disciples in the Gospels. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

**Fig. 1.5.** This Roman-era boat was recovered from the Sea of Galilee in 1986. The remains are 8.2 meters long and 2.3 meters wide. Numerous repairs, made with different types of lumber, show the boat had a long working life. Yigal Allon Center, Ginosaur, Israel. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



the very power holders who were oppressing the people with heavy taxation and interest on loans prohibited by Israelite covenantal law. These leaders would have had an unusually poignant sense of how the Israelite ideal of a life of cooperation and justice in semi-independent, self-sustaining communities was disintegrating. Such people would have responded eagerly to a message of God's imminent restoration of Israel. Having already been cut loose from the land, moreover, they would have been free to move about from village to village on speaking-healing-organizing missions, in contrast to villagers who needed to remain in place in order to work the fields.



**Fig. 1.6.** Modern reconstruction of a Roman fishing boat based on the archaeological remains of a boat from first-century Galilee. The size of the craft indicates the scale of the Roman fishing industry, requiring a hired crew much larger than a family operation. Photo: Richard A. Horsley.

The earliest Gospel sources portray the Jesus movements as having developed initially in Galilee. Mark represents Jesus as having his base of operations in Capernaum, a village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee—an account that is generally accepted as historically credible. That also fits the idea of Peter and Andrew and James and John's having been fishermen. In the mission speech in Q, Jesus utters curses on Capernaum, the nearby village of Chorazin, along with Bethsaida, a town across the border in Herod Philip's territory. Such curses presuppose that the mission was active in those communities but that they later backed away or rejected the mission.

Mark then also has Jesus and his disciples extend their mission beyond Galilee into the villages of Tyre to the northwest, those of



**Fig. 1.7.** Ruins of the synagogue of Chorazim, situated above Lake Genesaret (the Sea of Galilee). Hellenistic architectural style. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Caesarea Philippi to the north, and those of the Decapolis to the east and south of the Sea of Galilee. This may well reflect the movement's extension by the time Mark's story was composed and being performed in the constituent communities a few decades after Jesus' own mission. It should not be surprising that movements of local renewal and resistance to rulers among one people would become appealing to others and extend over the frontiers. The Syro-Phoenician-woman episode in Mark's story indicates that the inclusion of a woman specifically known as from the dominant Hellenic culture was a serious issue for the Jesus movements. Yet the rapid expansion of the Jesus movements beyond the primarily Aramaic-speaking Galilee into Syrian villages, including some Greek-speaking communities, suggests that villagers of previously non-Israelite culture fairly easily identified with Israelite tradition. This is indicated by the very existence of Mark and Q in Greek as texts performed in communities of a movement.

### **Covenant Renewal**

Closely coupled with the exodus, in the formative traditions of Israel, was the covenant with God made on Mount Sinai. The Mosaic covenant and its fundamental principles of political-economic relations (the Ten Commandments) played a crucial role in the people's

repeated resistance to oppressive rulers and struggles to restore just social relations. According to Josephus's accounts of the social turmoil of the great revolt, roughly a generation after Jesus' mission in Galilee, violations of covenantal principles by the elite were what mobilized Galilean peasants to collective action. Clearly, the covenantal principles still provided the operative foundation for social-economic relations in village communities and for their political-economic relations with their rulers.<sup>15</sup>

Ostensibly, of course, covenantal principles and mechanisms were still observed by the temple-state as well as the peasantry. There was society-wide observance, for example, of the seventh-year rest for fields and the seventh-year cancellation of debts, traditional covenantal mechanisms designed to keep subsistence peasant households viable on their land. Hillel, the distinguished elder of the Pharisees, had promulgated the famous *prosbul* as a bypass of the sabbatical cancellation of debts, ostensibly to "ease credit" for already indebted peasants. The covenant was thus clearly still well-known among scribal groups such as the Pharisees, who strove to adapt or vitiate covenantal principles in order to allow the consolidation of power in the Jerusalem temple-state. As we know now from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the dissident scribal and priestly community that withdrew to the wilderness at Qumran used the Mosaic covenant as the basic model for their utopian attempt at the renewal of Israel.

It should not be surprising therefore that in both Mark's story and the Q speeches, in which the main theme is the renewal of Israel over against its rulers, covenant renewal should figure prominently. In Mark the covenant theme runs throughout the narrative, with a covenant discourse and a covenant meal at crucial points in the story. In Q the longest and most substantive speech is a renewal of the covenant. The prominence of covenant renewal in the earliest Gospel sources suggests that it was prominent in the Jesus movements that produced and used them.

The basic components of the Mosaic covenant even provide the structure of the longest speech in Q (6:20-49).<sup>16</sup> In the original pattern, a declaration of God's deliverance (focused on the exodus) as a basis of obligation prefaced the principles of social relations that constituted the core demands of the covenant, which were then sanc-

tioned by blessings and curses. These components can be observed at many conspicuous points in the books of the Hebrew Bible: in covenant making, covenantal laws, and covenantal teachings. They are also prominent in key texts of the Qumran community found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Most significant for the covenant speech in Q is how the pattern of components is creatively transformed in the initiation ceremony for those entering the renewed covenantal community in the Qumran Community Rule (1QS). The covenant speech in Q exhibits a similar adaptation of the basic components. In both the blessings and curses components, a previously sanctioning motivation has been transformed into a new declaration of God's deliverance, only now in the present and future ("Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"). Other materials now provide the sanction (double parable of building houses on the rock or sand). Still central, of course, are the covenantal principles (laws, teachings, focal instances) that allude to and adapt traditional covenant principles, as guidance for community social and economic interaction.

The covenantal discourse in Q, moreover, is couched in performative speech, that is, speech that makes something happen (for example, "I now pronounce you husband and wife"). The speech enacts a renewal of the Mosaic covenant in the assembled community. The blessings pronounced on the poor, hungry, and mourning announce God's new deliverance happening in the mission of Jesus and the formation and life of the movement, with the corresponding pronouncement of woes on the wealthy. The declaration of covenantal principles (the "love your enemies" set of sayings) gives focal instances of ways in which community members are to quit their local quarrels, insults, and conflicts and return to the covenant ideals of cooperation and mutual support. They are to "love your enemies, do good, and lend." The thrust is to restore the mutuality and solidarity of village community life. That presumably would strengthen the village community with regard to the pressures that are contributing to its disintegration, most obviously the heavy taxation resulting in indebtedness to the cursed wealthy, which exacerbates their poverty and hunger.

Closely associated with the covenant commandments in Israelite tradition were the time-honored mechanisms of prohibition of

interest on debts and sabbatical cancellation of debts and release of debt-slaves. Debts were the bane of peasant life and could become a downward spiral from which a family could never recover. That is why Israelites and most other peasantries developed mechanisms of what has been called a “moral economy,” mechanisms that could keep each constituent multigenerational family economically viable.<sup>17</sup> The “Lord’s Prayer” in Q, also performative speech, is thus also a covenantal economic as well as religious prayer. The “third petition” is a combination of a plea to God for cancellation of debts and the corresponding commitment to cancel whatever debts were owed by fellow villagers. As expressed in the parallel petitions of the prayer, cancellation of debts along with the provision of subsistence food (“daily bread”) is what the kingdom of God means.

Parallel to the covenantal speech in Q, Mark presents a covenantal discourse in a series of dialogues (Mark 10) that deal successively with marriage, status in the community, economic relations, and leadership. These dialogues feature a number of covenantal law-like pronouncements (“What God has joined together, let no one separate!” 10:9) as well as recitation of the covenant commandments (10:19). Like the original covenant principles, the principles enunciated in this series of dialogues (like the focal instances in Q 6:27-39) govern particular facets of local social-economic relations, that is, prohibition of divorce protecting marriage at the core of the family unit (no adultery), sanction against the desire for surplus goods (wealth; no coveting, no stealing of others’ goods), and a declaration that leaders must be servants, not aspire to power (one of the purposes of the covenant as a whole).

Besides this covenantal renewal discourse directed to social-economic-political relations within the community of the movement, Mark includes other dialogues with covenantal themes. The most pointed is his charge against the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem who urge peasants to “devote” (*korban*) their property to the Temple. He declares that such demands violate the basic covenant commandments. He gives the example of “honoring father and mother” to illustrate that the goods and produce of peasant families are needed for local subsistence, as in supporting the elders who can no longer labor productively (Mark 7:1-13). This appeal to the original covenantal



“commandment of God” in order to condemn the predatory devices of the representatives of the Temple reinforces peasant families’ and village communities’ attempts to resist the oppressive demands of their rulers. Similarly, Jesus declares that the scribes based in the Temple “devour widows’ houses” (household or possessions). He then illustrates how this happens in the widow’s donation of the last copper coin of her “living” to the Temple, again reinforcing the popular resistance to Temple demands. Mark’s story thus has Jesus use covenantal references both as principles of community welfare and cooperation and as principles of resistance to the ruling institutions and their representatives.

The covenant renewal discourses and other covenantal teaching in the two earliest Gospel sources offer further indications that the Jesus movements that used these texts were based in local communities that they were attempting to restore to the ideals of mutuality and cooperation of Israelite tradition. Other peasant peoples usually had traditional principles and mechanisms that corresponded to Israelite covenantal commandments and sabbatical cancellation of debts. Thus the (renewed) Israelite covenant that forms a central aspect of Jesus movements would have been easily adapted by village communities across the frontier in Syria.

### **Persecution and Repression**

Ancient and medieval rulers seldom kept their peasants under surveillance. The Judean historian Josephus makes it sound highly out of the ordinary even when Herod arranged for informers on the residents of Jerusalem. About the only time that rulers paid any heed to the semiautonomous village communities over which they “ruled” was at harvesttime, when they sent officers to the threshing floors to appropriate taxes. The Roman approach to “pacification” was to terrorize the populace by brutal slaughter and enslavement of villagers and gruesome public crucifixion of insurgents. As noted above, the Roman governors and their clients in Jerusalem and Galilee seem to have been regularly taken by surprise by protests, prophetic movements, and rebellions. Only after disruptions arose did they send out massive military force to destroy them.

It may be all the more telling, therefore, that Q and Mark contain so many references to persecution of movement members: the likelihood of being arrested, brought to trial, even crucified (Mark 13:8-9; Q 12:2-3; 14:26). In fact, one of the standard speeches shared, in different versions, by Mark and Q is an exhortation about remaining steadfast when brought to trial and faced with the threat of execution (Mark 8:34-38; Q 12:2-12). The people who heard Q apparently understood themselves to be in the long line of prophets who had been persecuted and killed (11:47-51; 13:34-35; compare 6:22-23). All of these references and passages suggest that the movements had come to the attention of the rulers of Galilee and other territories, who periodically took repressive action to check the growth of the movement. This parallels the experience of other movements of Jesus-followers: periodic attacks by the high priestly or Herodian rulers on the leaders of the Jerusalem community as portrayed in Acts and Paul's arrest and imprisonment as mentioned in his letters. The gist of the warnings and exhortations about repression in both Mark and Q is that it is only to be expected. The people are not to worry about it, however, but to be ready to face martyrdom, as had Jesus, in the trust that they would receive divine inspiration in the hour of testing and would be vindicated in the divine judgment.

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## **WHAT HAPPENED TO THESE JESUS MOVEMENTS?**

There is no obvious reason to imagine much continuity between any of the early Jesus movements or Christ-believers and what later became established Christianity, since the latter was shaped by later generations of "bishops and councils." It was later church councils, for example, that canonized the four Gospels. By the time of those fourth- or fifth-century councils, however, Mark was being read differently from the way it was understood in the early communities for which it was produced. The principal way in which Mark and the Q speeches found minimal continuity with later developments was through their absorption and transformation into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As the first Gospel in the canon, Matthew became the most widely influential in the next several centuries. The initial absorption

of Mark and Q into the composition of Matthew's Gospel, however, did not dramatically alter the identity and agenda of the movements addressed in Mark and Q. Like its sources, Matthew's Gospel and its community still understood themselves as a renewal of Israel, not a new religion.

We simply do not know what the outcome of the Jesus movements in Galilee and southern Syria may have been, how long their influence lasted in the village communities in which they took root. It must be due to the rapid spread and dramatic impact of Jesus' mission in the first generation that we have records of such popular movements in the first place. Peasant movements generally leave no records. Galilean villages in which the movement took root may have been among those decimated in the Roman reconquest in the summer of 67. Villages further north and east in Syria were probably much less affected.

It would be unwarranted to conclude that these movements represented by Mark and Q simply died out and left no trace after a generation or two and that the diverse branches of later Christianity developed only on the basis of the urban communities established by Paul and others. The letters of Pliny provide evidence that the movements of Jesus-followers or Christ-believers continued to spread into village communities as well as cities as far away as northern Asia Minor into the second century. It is tempting to imagine that the teachings included in the movement manual or handbook known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" (*Didache*) may have been directed to Greek-speaking village communities of a movement in Syria similar to the one addressed in the Q speeches. The issues addressed and the teachings given appear as a likely later stage in the development of a movement parallel to the one addressed in the Q speeches. For example, the covenant discourse that opens "The Teaching" is expanded with traditional Israelite covenantal teachings, but lacks the performative power involved in the Q speech's transformation of the covenantal components. And the workers ("prophets") sent out in the mission discourses in Q and Mark have now become a problematic drain on the economic resources of subsistence communities when they want to prolong their prophetic "mission." The communities to which the *Didache* is addressed do not appear to be the same as those addressed in Q or Mark. The instructions for the

eucharist assume that Jesus stands in continuity with “the Holy Vine of David,” that is, the popular messianic tradition, not the popular prophetic tradition of Moses and Elijah, and baptism is done with a full-blown trinitarian formula. The communities addressed in the *Didache*, however, are a network of village and small-town assemblies that parallel those addressed in Q and Mark.

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## THE RENEWAL OF ISRAEL

The earliest Jesus movements, known from the earliest Gospel sources Mark and Q, did not comprise a new religion. Rather, they were movements whose agenda was the renewal of Israel in resistance to the imperial rulers of the people. These movements did not form new communities but set about renewing the social-economic relations of already-existing Galilean village communities according to the basic principles of the Mosaic covenant. They quickly spread to villages across the frontier under the jurisdiction of other Roman client rulers. But they continued to cultivate the Israelite tradition and covenantal principles, as adapted and transformed in Jesus' teaching and practice. And they continued their distinctively Israelite identity even after they took root in Greek-speaking communities and performed the story and speeches of Jesus in Greek.

In their origins the earliest Jesus movements are part of the history of the Galileans, Judeans, and Samaritans under the rule or continuing authority of the high priestly rulers in Jerusalem. Jesus and the movements that formed in response to his mission are closely parallel in basic ways to other popular movements at the time among the Judeans and Samaritans as well as the Galileans. All of these popular movements formed in resistance to the Jerusalem as well as the Roman rulers, consistent with the general division in ancient societies between rulers and ruled. In social form these Jesus movements parallel the popular prophetic movements insofar as both Mark and Q, with numerous allusions to Israelite tradition, represent Jesus as a Moses- and Elijah-like prophet leading a renewal of Israel. Mark complicates this somewhat with some messianic motifs, yet cautiously and critically so.

Whereas the other popular prophets called their followers away from their village communities into the wilderness, however, the Jesus movements focused on renewal of village communities themselves. And that may explain why the rulers of Galilee and nearby areas did not destroy the Jesus movements in the same way that the Roman governors simply eliminated the Samaritan and Judean prophetic movements. The imperial authorities, however, after executing Jesus as a rebel leader, did carry out periodic repression of his movements. In so doing they perhaps sensed that these movements aimed to strengthen village independence, mutual support, and solidarity in resistance to the imperial order and its disintegrative effects on the subject peoples.

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