THE TESTIMONY TO JESUS IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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1. Roots of the Tradition

a) When an Israelite was healed from a long lasting illness, he did not simply return to his work gladly to enjoy his new-found health. He offered his thank offering to God. If he did not live close to Jerusalem, he would pay for it to a priest who lived close by him and who went up for his service in the temple twice a year. But he also spread the story of his healing in the community, perhaps immediately after his cure or on the sabbath after the service of worship, and his audience joined in the praise of God. In a world which knew neither newspaper nor television, the story would make the rounds and would be told again in adjacent villages. Merchants and salesmen reported about the event, if it was spectacular enough, or even in case of less striking cures when they met with sick persons. In this way also, Jesus' deeds were made known. It was reported how he came to the village and found the sick, how serious the illness was and how long it had lasted, what Jesus said and did to him, how he got well again so that all could see it, and how he and those around him then fell to praising God in their joy. This is approximately the pattern in which Jesus' healings are still reported in the New Testament. Similar things were told of Hellenistic miracle workers, but with some typical differences. There, at the end of the story, an appeal was made on the basis of the proof by miracle to have
faith in the God who bestows healing, but the disciples of Jesus told of a faith which was frequently very much in its beginning stage and in which the sick person learned to trust Jesus (Mark 9:24, 1:24,40; 2:3-5,5-6f., 23,28; 6:5,56; 7:28; 10:47; Mat 8:8; Luke 17:13; John 5:6-8,13).

Even after Jesus' death, when other sick people had no hope left to be healed directly by him, such stories continued to be told in praise of the great man of God. Jesus' disciples may have repeated them to convince others that God had been with this Jesus, and that consequently the listeners should join the community of Jesus which honored his deeds and teachings and which was convinced that, through him, God wanted definitively to call Israel, indeed perhaps even the whole world, to repentance, to faith in God's incipient kingdom.

b) When, in these healings, Jesus spoke some prophetic word as we read it in Luke 11:20 ("If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"), then all kinds of hope for a general salvation were connected with it. Some may have thought of liberation from Roman occupation, some of the beginning of paradisaic opulence, others again of the end of this world and the start of a heavenly life in the likeness of angels. Then the one cured individual was no longer important, nor was the hope for the cure of others, but a much more comprehensive vision which was conjoined to Jesus. Those who kept faith in Jesus even after his death, who on grounds of his resurrection perceived in him more than ever the decisive Messenger of God, had to ask themselves in what sense this word was true. They have repeated it, together with a short reference to the occasion, the cure of someone possessed, without which the word would have been meaningless (Luke 11:14). They had to refute also other possible explanations, like the suspicion of magic; and in so doing they