1. Introduction

From the Christian gospels as well as from Jewish and Roman sources we gain the impression that Jesus was put to death on primarily or even purely political charges. In all four gospels he is presented as a prophet who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God and who claimed, as God’s final agent, an essential role in its establishment. The heart of his message seems to have been the proclamation of God’s imminent kingdom on earth together with a call for repentance.¹

This prophetic and highly eschatological message of Jesus caused considerable commotion among the Jews in Palestine and above all among their religious and political leaders in Jerusalem who formed the local Jewish council or Sanhedrin. The historical evidence, however, points out that Jesus was executed (crucified) by the Romans, which makes it pretty clear that the charges on which he was put to death were political ones. This means that it was not, for instance, Jesus’ supposed critical attitude towards the Jewish law or the temple as such which led to his condemnation. Rather, it was the threat of a political revolution against the Romans which induced the latter to put Jesus to death. Most probably, Jesus’ behaviour as an itinerant charismatic preacher made people (and perhaps Jesus himself) believe that he was the promised Messiah, the king of Israel, who would overthrow the Roman rule and establish a new kingdom of Israel. This expectation led to much commotion and confusion among Jews in Palestine and in Jerusalem in particular. As a consequence, the Jewish

¹ See esp. Mark 1:15, “... The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”. All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
authorities who were afraid of stirring up trouble with the Romans, decided to extradite Jesus to the Romans in order to be executed.

What Jesus exactly did and said that made people believe that he might be the promised Messiah is highly speculative. The Jewish and pagan sources do not mention any detailed information about Jesus’ words and deeds, and the Christian gospels do not give a historically reliable account of his life. Moreover, the gospels were written down between forty and seventy years after he was crucified. The only thing we may conclude with any certainty is that there were people who already during his lifetime believed that he was the promised Messiah and who did not give up this belief after his violent death. On the contrary: they were convinced that Jesus had suffered the death of a martyr and was now in heaven. They kept on believing that the end of time was at hand, that God’s kingdom would come in the near future, and that Jesus would return from heaven and would play some role in God’s final judgment on mankind.

Instead of dying out after Jesus’ death, the ‘Jesus movement’ continued and even grew. At first it was confined to Galilee and to the city of Jerusalem and its direct environment, but soon afterwards there arose small Christian communities all over the country and elsewhere thanks to people like the apostle Paul who moved from town to town preaching the gospel to all who were willing to listen to their message. Not only Jewish people were attracted to the message of “Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead”. Quite the contrary: most Christian communities existed exclusively or almost exclusively of members who were pagans before they entered the Christian movement. They all felt united in a common faith in Jesus Christ, who had been killed as an innocent man but had been raised to life again, and who they believed would soon return to the earth to gather his people around him.

But who was Jesus of Nazareth really? What things did he really say and do while he walked around in Palestine? It may seem strange to us now, but it appears that such questions did not bother most of the early Christians that much. It is remarkable that the first early Christian author whose writings have survived, the apostle Paul, hardly ever makes references in his letters to words or deeds of Jesus. This

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3 Cf., e.g., 1 Thess. 4:14, 17; 5:10.