In chapter 6 of my proposed book Jesus Before the Gospels, after I deal with collective memory in theory, I move on to talk about how Jesus was remembered in three different early Christian communities, those behind the Gospels of Mark (our earliest canonical Gospel), John (our latest canonical Gospel), and Thomas (our best known non-canonical Gospel). One thing we have learned from memory studies is that the present affects not only what is remembered about the past, but also how it is remembered. That is true for communities as well as individuals. And so in my treatment of how Jesus was remembered in such different ways in these three communities, I discuss as well what can be established or at least surmised about the historical circumstances that would have made such memories plausible.

I don’t want to spill the beans here about what I say for each of these communities, but I do want to show how scholars have tried to establish the historical context for one of them, the one behind the Gospel of John. Here is how I lay out the matter in my New Testament textbook discussion of John, and the three stages in the life of the community. This will take two posts.

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Stage One: In the Synagogue

The oldest stories of the Fourth Gospel appear to indicate that the Johannine community originated as a group of Jews who came to believe that Jesus was the messiah, who nonetheless continued to maintain their Jewish identity and to worship in their Jewish synagogue. We do not know where exactly this community was originally located, except that it may have been someplace in Palestine where Aramaic was spoken.

The reasons for drawing these historical conclusions come from our only source of information, the Gospel of John itself. Some of John’s stories emphasize Jesus’ Jewishness and narrate how some Jews came to identify him as the Jewish messiah. Since this identification of the messiah would have been of no interest to pagans (it’s a reference to the deliverer of Israel), it makes sense that the stories would have been told within Jewish communities. Since the stories presuppose knowledge of Jesus’ own mother tongue, Aramaic, they appear to have been among the most ancient accounts of the Gospel.

This community of Jewish believers may have owed their existence to a follower of Jesus whom they later called “the Beloved Disciple.” This enigmatic figure appears several times in the course of the Gospel; he appears to have enjoyed a position of prominence among those who told the stories (see, for example, John 13:23; 19:26-27; 20:2-8).

It appears that these Jewish converts attempted to proselytize other members of their Jewish synagogue. Evidence for this hypothesis is found not only in such stories as the call of the disciples, which presumably would have been told in order to show how some Jews had recognized Jesus as their messiah, but also, perhaps, in the Signs Source. You may recall the theory that this source ended with the words now found in 20:30-31: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” The purpose of the Signs Source, in other words, was missionary. It recorded the miraculous deeds of Jesus precisely in order to convince Jews that Jesus was the messiah. Originally, then, the signs were not designed to show that Jesus was God. They indicated that he was empowered by God as his representative. Jesus was still understood to be a special human being at the stage of the
community’s history in which the stories were first told, but he was not yet thought of as himself divine.

Stage Two: Excluded from the Synagogue

It is impossible to say how long the Jews of this community remained in their synagogue without causing a major disturbance. What does become clear from several of the stories of the Fourth Gospel is that a significant disruption eventually took place in which the Jews who believed in Jesus were excluded from the synagogue. There is no indication of exactly what led to this exclusion, but it is not difficult to paint a plausible scenario. First-century Jews by and large rejected any idea that Jesus could be the messiah. For most of them, the messiah was to be a figure of grandeur and power, for example, a heavenly being sent to rule the earth, or a great warrior king who would overthrow the oppressive forces of Rome and renew David’s kingdom in Jerusalem. Jesus was clearly nothing of the sort. On the contrary, he was an itinerant preacher who was executed for treason against the state.

So long as the Jews who believed in Jesus kept a low profile, keeping their notions to themselves, there was probably no problem with their worshipping in the synagogue. But from its earliest days, Christianity was a missionary religion, dedicated to converting others to faith in Jesus. In the Johannine community, as in most other Jewish communities, the Christians were no doubt rejected by the majority of the Jews and probably mocked and marginalized. This may have led on the one hand to increased antagonism from non-Christian Jews and, on the other hand, to heightened efforts at evangelism on the part of the Christian Jews. Eventually, these believers in Jesus became something more than a headache. Perhaps because of their persistent badgering of the skeptical and their refusal to keep their views to themselves — or perhaps for some other unknown reason — this group of believers in Jesus was forced to leave the Jewish community.

There is some evidence within the Gospel of John itself that the Jewish Christians within the synagogue were at some point forced to leave. Several scholars have considered the most compelling piece of evidence to be embodied in the healing story of John 9. In this account, Jesus heals a man who had been born blind. The Jewish authorities take umbrage at this action, because it has occurred on the Sabbath. They interrogate the man who has been healed, trying to learn how he gained his sight. When he identifies Jesus as the one who healed him, they refuse to believe it and call in his parents to uncover the truth. His parents, however, refuse to answer their questions, insisting that since he is of age, they should ask the man himself. And then the author explains why the man’s parents refuse to cooperate, in one of the most intriguing verses of the entire Gospel: “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22).

This verse is significant from a socio-historical perspective because we know that there was no official policy against accepting Jesus as messiah — or anyone else as the messiah, for that matter — during his lifetime. On the other hand, some Jewish synagogues evidently did begin to exclude members who believed in Jesus’ messiahship towards the end of the first century. It appears then that the story reflects the experience of the later community that stood behind the Fourth Gospel. These believers in Jesus had been expelled from the Jewish community, the community, presumably, of their families and friends and neighbors, the community in which they had worshipped God and had fellowship with one another.
This expulsion from their synagogue had serious implications for the Christian community’s social life and, correspondingly, for the way it began to understand its world and its stories about its messiah, Jesus.