Jesus as News: Crises of Health and Overpopulation in Galilee

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Abstract
What made Jesus ‘news’? The key reason given in Mark and Matthew is that Jesus was an effective healer. In Q, likewise, Jesus fulfils John’s prediction of a Coming One who will baptize in Holy Spirit and fire by means of his healing mission. Luke complicates this slightly by emphasizing Jesus’ teaching on social justice, and John conceptualizes the healings as ‘signs’, but both also indicate that Jesus was news because he healed people. Thus, Galilee was in the grip of a chronic health crisis which people – both rich and poor – experienced as stress, and Jesus was news because he provided a solution. While being an exorcistic healer was not unusual, Jesus’ healing apparently was, both in its effectiveness and in its approach, involving physical touch. We now know that affective touch has a positive effect on the immune system. Disease crises in Galilee can be linked to the great density of its population, associated with widespread rural poverty and environmental degradation. Previous assessments of population in Galilee have hitherto been much too small.

Keywords
Jesus, Galilee, news, healing, touch, population, health crisis

One of the most important spurs in historical enquiry is when our own time shifts. History is an engagement with evidence from the past, but this engagement is rooted in our own present circumstances, personal and cultural. There are always restrictions and opportunities, perspectives and blind-spots. When times

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change, sometimes we see differently. An aspect of a past personality or events can be noticed when previously it was not.

In our circumstances, at the time of writing, we sit in the glue of a global pandemic, with different countries dealing with the challenges in different ways. As the COVID-19 virus spread out from Wuhan in China to the ends of the earth, through the early months of 2020, it was as if a wheel turned, and it turned into this glue. In 2021 we remain stuck. Currently, we talk about a pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 world and hanker for the ‘normality’ of a life we hope to reclaim at some point in the future, but there is no certainty about when that will be. The general ‘eschatological’ hope is that COVID-19 will end, controlled by new vaccines (when no vaccine has ever been effective long term for any ever-changing coronavirus hitherto), and the familiar world as we knew it will be restored. As I write, such vaccines are being rolled out, but we await the results. In the meantime, we are in a mean time: the interim, a kind of holding zone of partial suspensions and full lockdowns, with masks to cover our lips and sanitizers to sting off the tiniest snippets of virus. We are familiar with the shape of our enemy, its appearance like a tiny dryer ball. Appearing on newscasts and websites, it is like a demon that invades and harms. We feel anxious, frustrated, restricted and even angry.

Given this change in our time, I would like to address some matters concerning the historical Jesus that have arisen for me, as a historian, in terms of a change of perspective. These relate to considering Jesus in his own time, and in his own place: Galilee. I will consider Galilee as a region in crisis.

*Jesus as News*

In the pandemic situation more of us are working at home, and I suspect that more of us are following the news, on different platforms, to keep connected with the world outside. In fact, we are continually bombarded with news stories, both from mainstream to social media. We check information received by friends and family. Often certain people are the focus of news stories, whether as instigators of particular actions or as recipients of terrible harm; sometimes the subjects are a group or a nation. It therefore seems now quite crucial to ask of any historical figure: What made them news? What was it in the era in which they lived that made their particular life significant enough for others to react to them?

In the ancient world, of course, newsworthiness is relatively easy to spot when it comes to leaders of countries or armies, especially when there are histories, biographies or encomia outlining why they are so significant. In terms of writers or artists, one can look at their works and assess them comparatively to determine what makes them so outstanding. But, when it comes to a prophet or reformer, we need to consider social context very carefully.
Given that most people who were remembered as illustrious were from great cities, how did Jesus, from a rural village on the edge of the Roman world, attract any interest at all? What was it that made crowds follow him? In order to understand why Jesus was news we need to think not only about what Jesus did, but about why his society responded to what he did. In other words: What was the crisis, or the underlying problem, that meant that Jesus was seen as the answer?

In looking to the effects Jesus had on his society, scholars have in recent years been looking primarily to economics and Empire as rubrics for understanding social discontents that led to people responding to Jesus. If Galilee was desperately poor, constrained and oppressed, and under the iron grip of the Roman Empire, then people would respond to Jesus in the same way as to other prophets of social change, as a liberator; certainly, Jesus seems to have provided some important covert critiques of the imperial project of Rome.¹ The problem is that what Jesus, and his disciples, wanted to achieve might not necessarily be what made him news. What do the gospels actually say?

To posit an economic crisis of desperate poverty and widespread dissatisfaction with the social hierarchies normative in an imperial situation would certainly tally with what makes Jesus news in Luke. The proclamation of Jesus placed at the beginning of Jesus’ mission is highly attuned to social justice. The moment Jesus comes back to Galilee ‘in the power of the Spirit’ we learn that ‘news (φήμη, literally ‘talk’) about him spread through all the surrounding country’ (Lk. 4.14). In terms of the Lukan narrative, this is before he has actually done anything. Perhaps whatever had happened to Jesus hitherto as an adult in Lk. 3.1–4.13 (his time with John, baptism, visionary experience of election and temptation) was reason enough for excitement, except there is no indication of how anyone knew about these things. Alternatively, perhaps it is assumed that Jesus’ wondrous childhood and being ‘in favour with God and with people’ (Lk. 3.52) had led to expectations. But, more likely, this is a narrative choice by the author of the gospel to ensure there is an audience ready for Jesus’ words, because when Jesus does actually do something, it is to teach. Thus: ‘he began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone’ (Lk. 4.15). As for what he teaches, the Lukan Jesus arrives in Nazareth and reads out a kind of hybrid Isaiah (58.6; 61.1-2 LXX; Lk. 4.18).²

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me

1. See, most especially, Aslan 2013; Horsley 1987, 2003. For more recent work there is the interesting study by Frisch 2016: 58-75.
2. In this quotation of Isa. 61.1, the statement ‘to heal the broken-hearted’ is omitted and ‘to send off the oppressed in liberty’ is added from Isa. 58.6. See Lear 2019: 159-72.
To bring good news to poor people.
He has sent me
To proclaim release to captives
And recovery of sight to blind people
To send off the oppressed in liberty,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

Following Isa. 61.1, good news is brought specifically to the poor. With Luke taken as a basis for what made Jesus news, it is a useful exercise then to consider how many poor people there were, to account for the ‘good news’ spreading as news among them, with a strong emphasis on application of social-scientific models for understanding society in Jesus’ time. Therefore, scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed have shown Galilee to be a place beset by social inequalities and terrible poverty, so that Jesus comes as both a peasant himself and a beacon of hope for a better, more egalitarian society, in the promise of the (inaugurated) Kingdom of God (Crossan 1991; Crossan and Reed 2001). But was there anything unusual about Galilee, given that a large peasantry and a tiny wealthy elite was normative in the ancient Mediterranean world? The question is whether there really was rapid social change in the first century in Galilee that led to a crisis, which would explain why Jesus ‘happened’.

Not everyone thinks there was widespread poverty in Jesus’ Galilee; however, most of the evidence for a more prosperous Galilee comes from the second to fourth centuries, and – even when one can now identify fine building works by Herod Antipas in Tiberias or Sepphoris – this does not necessarily translate to prosperity in the general population. The inhabitants are likely to have been taxed hard to fund such constructions. No household structure datable to the first century in Capernaum looks anything but poor, given that the compounds are often largely constructed out of unhewn basalt fieldstones, without even plastered walls. The Lukan proclamation that Jesus was bringing good news to the

3. See also Hanson and Oakman 1998; Oakman 2008.
4. As Morton Herning Jensen has said, this is provided as an answer to the question of ‘why Jesus “happened” when he did’ (2012b: 43).
5. Overman 1997: 67-74; Edwards 1992: 53-74; Aviam 2013: 5-48. For the evidence that a prosperous Galilee is often more related to the second–third centuries than the first, see McCullough 2013: 49-74.
6. In this assessment, while I do not follow Mattila 2013: 75-138, I acknowledge that there is evidence of some imported vessels and luxury items indicative of wealth in Capernaum during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. However, this does not counter the general impression of poverty one receives, as presented in the structures of the town from this period, especially on the western (Franciscan) side, as opposed to some wealthier structures and public
poor certainly seems to fit with the archaeology of such a town, which became Jesus’ base, and so a promise of the fulfilment of Isa. 61 might well account for the response of the poor to Jesus’ message.

However, different gospels have different emphases about what made Jesus news. Luke was written after Mark and Q, and probably also Matthew. As such, we can see that the writer of Luke deliberately alters the news paradigms in the sources used, to situate Isa. 61 in prime position and to emphasize a teaching paradigm.

In Mark, Jesus’ initial impact springs from two things alone: (1) a proclamation that the Kingdom of God is near and people should repent and believe this good news (Mk 1.15) and (2) Jesus’ remarkable exorcistic healing on the Sabbath in the synagogue of Capernaum (Mk 1.21-26), at which point ‘they’ were amazed and ‘the news (ἡ ἀκοή: lit. ‘the hearing’) of him went out right away everywhere into all the surrounding region of Galilee’. Then, ‘at evening, when the sun had gone down, they brought to him all who had illnesses and the demon-infested’ and Jesus accordingly treated/healed ‘many who were ill with various diseases and he cast out many demons’ (Mk 1.32-34). There is then a twofold activity of ‘proclaiming’ the good news (to more than the poor) and ‘healing/exorcizing’.

This twofold operation by Jesus is repeated in Mk 1.39: ‘and he went throughout all of Galilee [1] proclaiming in their synagogues and [2] casting out demons’. But, as for the news, it is the latter element that turns out to be key. There were exorcistic healers already, but Jesus is described as having a phenomenal impact,
from the very start. A great multitude of people from Galilee, Judaea and Jerusalem, Idumaea, Peraea, and from around Tyre and Sidon, ‘hearing such things that he did’ came to him [Mk 3.7-8] … because he healed many people, so that those who had diseases tried to get close to him, in order to touch him (Mk 3.10). In this news impact statement, there is no mention of the proclamation or teaching being the reason the crowds came to Jesus; it is all about what Jesus did: he healed people.

As for Q, the crowds who come to Jesus have already come to John the Baptist (Q 7.24-26, cf. Q 3.3, 7), and John was already news. Jesus teaches his disciples/followers (Q 6.20-49) and heals (e.g. Q 7.1-9; 11.23-26), but the key reason why Jesus is recognized as important is found in the reply to John the Baptist’s disciples via a mash of Ps. 146.8 and Isa. 61.1: Jesus is indeed the expected Coming One who will ‘immerse in Holy Spirit and fire’ (Q 3.16) because ‘the blind people see and the lame walk, the leprous are made clean and deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given good news and blessed is the one who is not offended by me’ (Q 7.22-23). It is of course this passage that provides the raw material for the Lukan shift, with Isa. 61.1 put at the start. This comment has often baffled scholars, since it has proven difficult to understand how it fulfils John’s prediction of one who baptizes/immerses in Holy Spirit and fire, and there is even a question about whether the final statement is somehow aimed at John. However, since Jesus is news in Q because he continues the programme of John the Baptist, then this statement should actually help us understand John’s predictions (with no critique of John intended). As I have explored already with Federico Adinolfi in regard to the Gospel of Mark, the (purifying) immersion in Holy Spirit by a Coming One, predicted by John, involves healing. The Spirit is that which Jesus receives at his baptism, and Jesus wields the Spirit in order to purify inwardly, i.e. heal. Likewise Q presents the Holy Spirit as active in the

10. In Mark it seems hard to make any clear boundary between exorcistic and non-exorcistic healing.
11. πολλοὺς γὰρ ἐθεράπευσεν, ὥστε ἐπιπίπτειν αὐτῷ ἵνα αὐτός ἄξωνται ὅσοι εἶχον μάστιγας. While normally the verb θεραπεύω means ‘treat’ or ‘minister to’, in the gospels the word has the sense of a successful treatment, and thus healing, see Wells 1998: 73-77.
12. For discussion of this passage, which combines Ps. 146.8 and Isa. 61.1, as found in 4Q521 2 ii, see Wink 1989: 121-28; Neirynck 1997: 27-64; Taylor 1997: 288-93; Hieke 2006: 175-88; for Q, see Robinson, Hoffmann and Kloppenborg 2000.
13. For a convincing refutation of the notion that Q 7.23 is a warning to John, see Tuckett 2004: 28. I am grateful to Federico Adinolfi for his comments on this section of my article and his helpful advice on references.
14. Taylor and Adinolfi 2012: 270-273. The arrival of the Holy Spirit in Mk 1.10-11 neatly fulfils John’s prediction that there will be someone mightier who ‘will immerse in Holy Spirit’ (1.8). After Jesus gains this Spirit directly from Heaven and is driven by this very Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by Satan (1.12), he proclaims the need for repentance and the coming of
healing work of Jesus (Q 11.20; 12.10). The additional dimension of fire found in Q is explained well in the statement of Q 12.49 (and see 12.51), where Jesus states: ‘I have come to ignite a fire in the world, and how I wish it were already kindled’.\textsuperscript{15} While there is a case for arguing that the Holy Spirit also has a fiery dimension of purification,\textsuperscript{16} in Q 3.17 the immersion in fire of Q 3.16b seems connected to eschatological judgment (cf. Q 3.9), strongly evidenced in other contemporaneous texts that envision a river or lake of fire in which the wicked will be annihilated (Taylor 1997: 138-41), though in Q 17.29-30 fire will rain (like a downpour) from the sky. In Q 12.49 Jesus has only ignited this fire; it has not yet even been kindled, but this immersion in fire of Q 3.16b is nevertheless somewhat fulfilled in Q 7.22-23. This is because for Jesus to say, ‘Blessed is the one who takes no offence in me’, actually implies that if someone is indeed offended, then the fire is ignited.\textsuperscript{17} It is a warning (Martinez 2012: 106-108). The fulfilment of John’s prediction of a Coming One then incorporates both a blessing (purifying immersion in Holy Spirit/healing etc.) and woe (immersion in fire, inaugurated by choices made now).\textsuperscript{18} Q 7.22-23 then is about Jesus’ activity

\textsuperscript{15} This is not paralleled in Matthew but is so embedded in a cluster of other Q sayings the onus would be on those who would wish it not to be part of this text to prove this. It appears in the Gospel of Thomas 10 in a slightly different way: ‘I have cast a fire on the world and look, I watch over it until it is ablaze’.

\textsuperscript{16} We could also link up the fire of Q 3.16b with a kind of purging cleansing of fiery wind (Q 3.19), guided by Num. 31.23, in relation to purification and protection against disease: ‘everything that can withstand the fire must be put through the fire and it will be clean. It should still be purified with the water of purification, and everything that cannot withstand the fire should pass through the water.’ The fire both purifies and burns off impurities. For further on the fiery Spirit, see Adinolfi 2019: 206 n. 19, 213-14.

\textsuperscript{17} Q 7.23 is in fulfilment of the ‘immersion in fire’ if it is read in fact to imply the opposite of a blessing, as in the ‘Lukan blessings and woes’ (Q 6.20-26). A link between someone either ‘blessed’ or condemned (woe) is also found in Q 12.42-46. That the Lukan woes (Lk. 6.24-26) are in Q, complementing the blessings, is suggested by Kloppenborg 2000: 96, 100, and more fully determined by Tuckett 1983: 193-207, 194-99.

\textsuperscript{18} In Q the twofold approach, prioritizing healing/exorcism, is summarized in Jesus’ instructions to his apostles: ‘heal the sick [among them] and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you”’(Q 10.9), with the additional action of purging eschatological judgment (= fire): if one of Jesus’ representatives are not welcome and given hospitality in a town, where they go to heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom, they should wipe off the dust from their feet as they leave, indicating they are taking nothing from the place, leaving it to the (fiery) consequences (Q 10.10-12).
fulfilling (for the pre-existent crowds who had already gone out to John) what the Baptist has predicted. This relates well to the twofold operation of Jesus indicated in Mark, but healing comes before proclamation, and there is here specific mention of the ‘poor’ being given the good news, from Isa. 61.1. The crowds now stay with Jesus and are ‘amazed’ (Q 11.14).

In Matthew, the synthesis of Mark and Q, there is a radical intervention in that the initial synagogue exorcism on the Sabbath as found in Mark is deleted entirely. The ‘impact statements’ from Mark (1.15, 39 and 3.7-8, 10) are summarized in one fell swoop immediately after the call of the fishermen (Mt. 4.18-22 = Mk 1.16-20). Thus, quite suddenly in Mt. 4.23-25 the same rationale as we have in Mark is provided for Jesus’ effect on the people of the region, but without any specific newsworthy incident. We learn that Jesus (1) ‘went around in all of Galilee teaching in their synagogues’ (= Mk 1.39) ‘proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom’ (= Mk 1.15) and (2) ‘healing every kind of disease and weakness among the people’19 (see Mk 3.10). Consequently ‘news of him went out into the whole of Syria [Palaestina] and they brought to him all those having illnesses, afflicted with various diseases and pains, demon-infested people, epilepsy sufferers and those who were paralysed, and he treated them, and huge crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judaea and from beyond the Jordan’20 (= Mk 3.7-8). The geographical range of the news story is described as Συρία, but the areas particularly specified are a combination of wider Judaea and the Decapolis cities, namely the region of Syria Palaestina, rather than Roman Syria, which stretched as far as the Euphrates.

For Matthew, as with Mark, it was not the proclamation of the Kingdom that was really newsworthy, or the liberative hope of Isa. 61.1-2, or even that Jesus fulfilled John’s predictions and followed in his footsteps; it was the simple promise of treatment for a variety of chronic maladies. By the time people arrive en masse outside his door in Capernaum (after the healing of Peter’s mother in law, Mt. 8.16-17), bringing ‘many demon-infested people’, Jesus had already been very busy around all of Galilee, fulfilling another prediction of Isaiah: ‘He took our weaknesses and carried our diseases’ (Isa. 53.4). It is expected at this point

19. Καὶ περιῆγεν ἐν Ἑλη τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ, διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρύσσον τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν ἐν τῷ λαῷ.

20. καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοὴ αὐτοῦ εἰς ᾿Ελην τὴν Συρίαν· καὶ προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ποικίλαις νόσοις καὶ βασάνοις συνεχομένους, δαιμονιζομένους καὶ σεληνιαζομένους καὶ παραλυτικούς, καὶ ἐθεράπευσαν αὐτούς. Matthew spells out the conditions of people, curiously distinguishing between those who were the subject of demonic attack and those who had other medical problems, creating variegation. However, Matthew has an addition to the notion of demon-infestation causing illness: while in Mk 6.7 the Twelve are simply given authority over ‘unclean spirits’, which results in healing, in Matthew (10.1) Jesus gave the disciples ‘authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity’.
that he responds to people by highly effective actions, and indeed: ‘he cast out the spirits by a word/statement (ἐξέβαλεν τὰ πνεύματα λόγῳ) and healed all those having illnesses’\(^{21}\) (Mt. 8.16). Jesus evicts the demons very efficiently and heals ‘all’ (when in Mark those healed were simply ‘many’).

Returning to Luke, then, the elements used in the Lukan news story are present in the sources of this gospel (Mark, Q, [Matthew?]), but redesigned in order to emphasize the Lukan social justice paradigm that focused on Jesus’ teaching, grounded in Isaiah. This gospel, nevertheless, does not push through with the Isaianic paradigm for long. Apart from moving the Nazareth episode forward and bringing in Isa. 61.1, the narrative sequence stays more or less with Mark (and Q). Unlike Matthew, the exorcism of Capernaum itself is included, and the consequent spread of news is not detached from it (Lk. 4.31-37): thus, regarding Jesus, ‘news (ἦχος, lit. ‘voice’) about him travelled out into every place of the surrounding country’. Nevertheless, there are certain Lukan downplays of Jesus’ healing/exorcism actions in favour of the teaching paradigm: Mk 1.39’s mention of ‘casting out demons’ is deleted in Lk. 4.44. While it is acknowledged that crowds wanted to be cured by Jesus and to touch him (Lk. 6.18-19), the people who come from ‘all Judaea and Jerusalem and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon’ are not just seeking healing from Jesus; rather they ‘came to hear him’ too (Lk. 6.17). In Mt. 9.35 it is said that Jesus ‘went around all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness’, but Luke only has Jesus ‘proclaiming the Kingdom of God’ (Lk. 8.1).

The change of emphasis in Luke only serves to make the news impact rationale of Mark and Matthew even more obvious: Jesus was news in Galilee primarily for being a very effective exorcistic healer. In John, this is true too, but of course the healings are absorbed into a wider category of ‘signs’, with a wider reach over the whole of Judaea, including Jerusalem and Samaria, from the outset: ‘many believed in his name’ when they saw his ‘signs’ (1.23) or found out about his gifts of second sight (5.42). They were impressed by signs and portents (5.48), which include healings (5.46-53). Following Mark’s lead, John too admits that ‘a huge crowd was following him, because they were seeing the signs that he was doing on those with [bodily] weaknesses’\(^{22}\) (6.2-3). However, in John there are different choices about how Jesus operates. The twofold Markan activity of proclamation and healing is not found in the same way; Jesus does not obviously teach people publicly in synagogues, despite saying he does (18.20),

\(^{21}\) Ὄψις δὲ γενομένης προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ δαιμονιζομένους πολλούς· καὶ ἔξεβαλεν τὰ πνεύματα λόγῳ, καὶ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ἐθεράπευσεν. When Jesus casts out the spirits ‘with a word/statement’ (λόγῳ) this would indicate a short command, as indicated in Mt. 8.13 (cf. Mk 1.41; 2.11; 5.34, 41; 7.34 and parr.; Lk. 7.14; Jn 5.8; 11.43).

\(^{22}\) ἡκολούθει δὲ αὐτῷ ὄχλος πολύς, ὅτι ἐθεώρουν τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσθενοῦντων.
but only reveals his revelatory knowledge to certain individuals and small groups, until there is a discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum (6.22-66).

Overall, then, the earliest and most reliable historical evidence suggests that Jesus was newsworthy and created a huge impact as a result of his reputation as a healer; the proclamation of the Kingdom (and judgment) was associated with this practical action. His work was a kind of ‘performance’, as John Dominic Crossan has noted (1991: xi). Crowds came to him for a cure for illness. In looking for a problem for which Jesus is seen as the answer, then, this suggests an environment in which people were desperate for cures and would make long journeys if they were given hope. It suggests a health crisis.

*Jesus the Healer in a Galilean Health Crisis*

To say that there was a health crisis in first-century Galilee is not to say that this was experienced as greatly abnormal, as in the case of a plague, though the plague in the time of Herod the Great (c. 24 BCE, Josephus, *Ant.* 15.300-301) was in living memory for older people, and such outbreaks of virulent disease would have been a threat at any time. We can today note that populations experience much hardship in health issues, including high infant mortality, both in times past and in parts of the world now and some may assume people become inured to it. But the very fact that Jesus was a sensation indicates that people experienced poor health and repeated deaths of loved ones as chronic stress (Taylor 2020b: 13).

Of course, the way diseases were spread was not understood as we understand this today (Hogan 1992). The Hebrew Bible ascribes the sending of diseases and plagues to God, but this did not forestall physicians using medicines to cure people, and indeed in Sirach such medicines are said to have been placed on the earth by God (Sir. 38.1-14). Despite scripture indicating that God sent diseases and plagues as a punishment (see, e.g., Exod. 15.16; Deut. 32.39; Ps. 91; Job 5.17-18), among the rural population of Judaea in the first century it seems that illness was ascribed to demonic activity, as the gospels indicate (and see Josephus, *War* 7.185; *Ant.* 8.47-48), not sent directly from God. The demons got their point of entry as a result of human wrongdoing.

Josephus can also provide alternative explanations, suited to a more sophisticated, urban readership. For example, the illnesses and plague that struck Judaea in the thirteenth year of Herod’s reign are ascribed to famine resulting in a change of diet (*Ant.* 15.300-301) (Kottek 1994: 41). People influenced by Hellenistic and Roman medicine could think of illness being the result of an imbalance in humours (Hippocrates, *Diseases* 4.51). There was a suspicion of bad air

23. The notion that a change of diet causes disease is found in Hippocrates, *Regimen in ancient diseases*; see Jones 1923: 63-125.
(Vitruvius, *Arch.* 1.4.1; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. Hist.* 2.47.1; 5.19.5), hence Josephus could define pestilential areas (*War* 4.456). Overall, such beliefs indicative of the influence of Hellenistic medicine can be clearly plotted in Jewish texts from the Second Temple to the rabbinic periods (Kottek and Horstmanshoff 2000; Newmyer 1996: 2895-911).

But ascribing illnesses to demonic activity was the widespread folk belief. Jesus was news because he was an effective healer, which meant he was also an exorcist. His social reach seems to have been broad. Despite use of the proclamation of the good news to the poor (Isa. 61.1), the gospels indicate that news of Jesus as a healer was important also to the moderately rich. Those in authority or with some degree of wealth might well have had access to the kinds of potions and remedies offered by physicians and could consult those with special knowledge of ‘roots, remedies and properties of stones’ like the Essenes (Josephus, *War* 2.136) (Taylor 2009: 226-44), but they are shown in the gospels as being as desperate as the poor for cures. Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, implores Jesus to come to lay his hands on his little daughter (Mk 5.21-43; Mt. 9.18-26); the royal official who meets Jesus at Cana does likewise for his ‘son’ in Capernaum (Jn 4.46-54) (Kok 2017: 52-94); the centurion (of Herod Antipas’s army?) is equally desperate, for the sake of his servant (Mt. 8.5-13; Lk. 7.1-10); Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, is healed of her illnesses, as other possibly well-off women (Lk. 8.1-3). Disease (whether interpreted as demon infestations or illnesses) affected everyone.

Jesus’ society, as in the wider ancient world, can be understood as being in the grip of a chronic ongoing health crisis, viewed in accordance with modern standards. As Jonathan Reed has noted, on the basis of analyses of skeletal remains:

> Life in first-century Galilee – though not necessarily dissimilar to other parts of the Mediterranean – was substantially different from the modern world and cannot be characterized as stable. Chronic and seasonal disease, especially malaria, cut down significant segments of the population and left even the healthy quite often ill (Reed 2010: 345). Reed notes, in common with other places in the Mediterranean, that Galilee would have suffered from ‘a plethora of quick-killing gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases such as dysentery, typhus, tuberculosis, plague and especially malaria’ (Reed 2010: 355), and indeed ‘Josephus at one point describes the areas south of the lake as pestilent and disease ridden (*B.J.* 4.456)’ (Reed 2010: 355).

In the modern Western world, medical advances have led to a sense of security in terms of diseases; most illnesses have seemed to be treatable, with the right medications and care. We have vaccinations for the worst viruses. Antibiotics can drive away bacterial infections. We have been led to expect not to die prematurely from the kinds of things that regularly killed people even just a hundred
years ago. This sense of security has now, in a post-COVID-19 world, started to erode. In March 2020, quite early on in the course of the pandemic, my husband and I fell ill with the disease. We were not so ill as to be hospitalized, but we were not in the particularly ‘light’ category of sufferers either. During the days of bed rest, isolation and weeks of recovery, I reflected a great deal on Jesus as a healer. As I noted in a post I wrote on The Jesus Blog, subsequently printed (Taylor 2020a: 18-19). I thought a lot about how little we actually know about how our immune systems function, and suddenly realized there was a kind of missing miracle in the story of Jesus’ healings as we have them in the gospels: that he never got sick himself, or not at least apparently.

COVID-19 is tremendously contagious, as we have found out. But, in Jesus’ own time, there were many diseases that were also extremely contagious, as outlined above. Jesus, as described in the synoptic gospels, stays remarkably clear of these illnesses, despite doing the opposite of self-isolating in a disease-ridden environment. He proactively enters houses in which people are lying sick with fevers (Mk 1.30-31 and parr.; Lk. 4.38), for example, and lays his hands on the sick (Mk 6.5; 8.23-25; Lk. 4.40; 13.13) or takes them by the hand (Mk 5.41; Mt. 9.25; Lk. 8.54). He touches blind and deaf people, even using his own spit as part of a cure (Mk 7.31-37; 8.22-26, Jn 9.11-41). As noted above, people therefore seek direct physical touch from Jesus for healing (Mk 3.3, 10; 5.23, 27; 7.32; Mt. 9.18, 20-21; Lk. 8.44-46, 53). The power (Spirit) of Jesus is released through such physical touch (Mk 5.30; Lk. 8.45-46). After his apostles are sent out to heal, ‘with authority over unclean spirits’ (Mk 6.7) in his name, they – like Jesus – are said to have ‘cast out many demons and anointed with oil many sick people and they healed [them]’ (Mk 6.13, and see Lk. 10.34). The anointing with oil, implying hands-on praxis, is something to be noted: Jesus and his apostles anointing people involved more than a simple press on a hand or head.24 Laying hands on a person could be a part of exorcistic healing, as attested in the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran (1QapGen 20.16-31),25 but, as David Aune has noted, physical touch attested as part of an exorcistic or any other ancient form of healing was apparently rare (Aune 2006: 395).26

24. The practice of treating the sick by anointing them with oil and praying over them is found also in Jas 5.14-15.
25. See Machiela 2015: 122-35; Flusser 1957: 107-108. Machiela rightly challenges any strong differentiation between healings and exorcisms in the practice of Jesus, and I use the term ‘exorcistic healings’ here. Importantly also, since demons are understood as being ‘unclean’, their eviction is also purification; see Taylor and Adinolfi 2012: 273.
26. Aune notes (2006: 395 n. 119) though that there is an instance of the touch of Vespasian’s foot healing a crippled man in Alexandria (Tacitus, Hist. 4.81, cf. Suetonius, Vesp. 7). However, to say ‘Jesus never touched demon-possessed individuals’ (p. 391) is not right; it is implied that he did this quite often overall in healings that are essentially exorcistic. In Mk 9.14-28 the boy with a ‘mute spirit’ is taken by the hand by Jesus, at the end, to help him stand up.
If physical touch (anointing with oil, touching) was not that common in healings after all, this in itself is an important clue to what made news about Jesus: he was hands on, ready to engage directly, up close and personal with anything causing harm in the human body. The healing power of affective touch in itself has now been widely documented in medicine (Anderson and Taylor 2011: 221-28). Quite apart from the ‘healing hands’ experienced by people in alternative medical practices, positive touch has been documented empirically to release serotonin and oxytocin in the recipient: these are hormones found to repair and boost the immune system (Roumier, Béchade and Maroteaux 2018: 181-96; Mössner and Lesch 1998: 249-71). Oxytocin in particular has been shown to inhibit septic conditions (Berczi 2012: 329-43).

As has been much explored, Jesus behaved like a shamanistic exorcistic healer who was in some way himself possessed (Craffert 2008; Davies 1995; Remus 1997), in this case by a ‘power’ (δύναμις) that people could even tap into even without him knowing, by touching him or his clothing. Jesus could feel it going out of him (Mk 5.25-34). The arrival of this power, the Holy Spirit, is clearly indicated in Mk 1.10-11 with an outline of a visionary experience Jesus himself must have told others about. As has been argued by Smith, Davies, Witmer and others, the incident should be understood as a ‘spirit possession’ foundation for Jesus’ healing ministry (Smith 1978: 96-97; Davies 1995: 59). Clearly, it was believed that this authority or power of the Holy Spirit created a shield against the demonic forces that would cause illness in the bearer.

Jesus was usually successful (though his apostles were slightly more patchy, apparently; see Mk 9.29). However, there were relapses: in the Q saying of Mt. 12.43-45 = Lk. 11.24-26, the demon, once cast out, goes through waterless areas seeking rest and decides to go ‘home’; finding it clear, swept and orderly, he comes back with seven others, so that the person is even worse than before. Nevertheless, we are led to imagine Jesus moving around the crowds in an ongoing health crisis, touching them, going into homes, with people positioned close around him (Mk 5.24, 31), without getting sick himself. One wonders if the people of Galilee knew of cases where an exorcistic healer evicted a demon only to find the very same demon causing troubles for the healer too. This may lie behind such texts as the Apocryphal Psalms (11Q11 5.4-14), which give

27. It is of course vitally important that the touch is the right kind: see Ellingsen et al. 1986; 2016: 1-16.
28. For Jesus’ specific exorcistic practices, see Twelftree 1993; Witmer 2013.
29. See the exploration by Moss 2010: 507-19, who discusses the dynamics of this flow from the perspective of gender.
30. Witmer notes rightly that the modifications made in Matthew and Luke ‘indicate a deliberate attempt to erase’ similarity to ‘the experiences of exorcists and healers cross-culturally’ (2013: 99).
instructions on repelling demonic attack, or even the Testament of Solomon (Witmer 2013: 45; Fröhlich 2013: 39-49). Again, this raises questions about the immune system, in this case Jesus’ own.

**Jesus among the Crowds: Population Density in Galilee**

A third point to consider as a result of our own crisis situation is population. News stories of COVID-19 have sometimes focused on how rapidly the disease can spread in places of high population density (Florida 2020). That the Galilean population was extremely dense is clear from what Josephus writes. In *War* 3.42-43, Josephus states that every inch of soil in Galilee is cultivated, with no waste land. There ‘the cities are close-packed (πυκναί)’ and ‘many of the villages everywhere are much-populated because of the [agricultural] abundance, so that the smallest [is said] to have over 15,000 inhabitants (43)’. The awkward phrasing indicates that the smallest of ‘many of the villages’ could be over 15,000 inhabitants, not that every village is that huge. As Thackeray noted, ‘We may suspect exaggeration’ (Thackeray 1961: 588). But other figures Josephus gives for population are equally large. When Cassius sacked the city of Tarichaea, he enslaved 30,000 people (*Ant*. 14.120; *War* 1.180). The total population of Galilee was more than three million (*War* 6.420), and Josephus himself mustered 60,000 infantry and a total of 100,000 fighters for the war against Rome (*War* 2.583, 576).

There is a widespread tendency in scholarship to dismiss Josephus’s population figures. But Josephus makes his assessments as a military commander, with access to accurate information about fortifications and populations. He knew precisely the boundaries of both Upper and Lower Galilee (*War* 3.35-44). It used to be thought that Josephus exaggerated in stating that there were 204 villages and cities in Galilee (*Life* 235), but recent archaeological surveys have indicated that this assessment is actually reasonably likely (David 2011: 21-36). Both archaeological and literary evidence suggests that there was extensive settlement of Galilee by Judaeans in the Hasmonaean period, with numerous new villages created from scratch (Leibner 2009). Josephus’ measurements of distance and size have largely been verified by archaeological investigations (Broshi 1982: 379-84). He apparently not only used his own recollections, but also the imperial ὑπομνήματα of Vespasian and Titus for his information (*Life* 342, 358; *Contra Apionem* 1.56). This being so, had Josephus got factual information about numbers drastically wrong, he would have risked serious chastisement from his readership. While he did of course have some licence, and could modify things, there

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31. ὑπὲρ πεντακισχιλίους πρὸς τοῖς μυρίοις: literally ‘over 5000 added to 10,000’.
32. Mastermann considered the population figures ‘manifestly absurd’; see Masterman 1908: 407.
were significant constraints on Josephus, given he was writing for people who had direct experience of the Judaean revolt and access to the data.

The main point Josephus makes is just how very densely populated Galilee was. He was not alone: that the area of Galilee and wider Judaea was very highly populated is found not only in Josephus but also very much in the works of his predecessor Philo of Alexandria. ‘For the Judaeans have such a large population (πολυανθρωπία) that no one country can hold them’ (Flaccus 45, as also Mos. 2.232, and see Spec. 1.141; Legat. 214). The nation of the Jews is highly populous (πολυάνθρωπος, Deus 148, 178; Spec. 1.7, 78); in fact, it is the ‘most populous of all nations’ (Congr. 3), the ‘most populous of all nations anywhere’ (Virt. 64). Syria Palaestina is where most of the ‘highly populous nation of the Jews’ live (Prob. 75), and so many people give their first-fruits to the Jerusalem priests that they are overwhelmed with plenty (Spec. 1.321). For Philo, the huge population of Judaea was remarkable even in the ancient world: Phoenicians are astonished at how many Judaeans arrive to protest to the general Petronius against the statue of Gaius Caligula, because they had no idea how populous the nation was (Legat. 226).

With this kind of consistency in literary attestation, it seems that the current archaeological assessments made of Judaean populations, based on comparative models in the Roman world, are likely erring on the side of drastically too small, using assumed population ratios that are not relevant. In terms of assessments of ancient population density on the basis of archaeology, it is acknowledged to be extremely difficult, as pointed out by Uri Leibner, who presents a range of possible populations in ancient Galilean settlements in his survey (Leibner 2009: 308). Just how difficult it is can be seen in the ranges of estimates for the whole of Judaea (or Syria Palaestina) as falling between 2,265,000 and a mere 500,000 inhabitants.33 There is a strong tendency to minimize sizes of Galilean populations.34 Nathan Schur has even recently suggested that Roman Sepphoris held only 2000–4300 people (Schumer 2017: 90-111). Capernaum, with an area of 17 hectares, has been estimated to have had a population of just 1700 (Reed 2002: 82-83; 1992; 1994: 203-19). Even Magen Broshi, who was more realistic in his estimates, suggested multiplying the coefficient of 400 persons per hectare (40 to 50 people per dunam) multiplied by the total combined area of a city, minus public and open spaces (Broshi 1979: 1-10).

As for rural settlements, 16–25 people per dunam has been considered a standard model. But, in the Old City of Jerusalem today, which in many ways is

33. McCown thought there were less than one million inhabitants (1947). Wildly different estimates were noted by Byatt 1973: 51-60, at 51, before he suggested 2,265,000 for the whole country, while Schwartz 2001, assumed just 500,000.

34. For example, Crossan and Reed 2001: 34-35 estimate Jesus’ Nazareth held only 200–400 people.
comparable to ancient walled cities, with multi-storey structures, the population density for residential areas is 90 persons per dunam, i.e., 900 persons per hectare (Khamaisi et al. 2009: 22). Even that may reflect too roomy a sense of space. While not a city at all, today about 160,000 people are living in Rocinha, Brazil’s largest favela, which largely has two-level structures and a total area of just 143.50 hectares (Arcidiacono et al. 2017: 356) giving a population density of 1115 people per hectare. Given that ancient villages and towns could have additional mudbrick and other impermanent structures and superstructures hidden from the archaeological record, over-reliance on stone remains for population estimates is problematic; we do not know from these just how many people managed to squeeze into such existing walls.

What is clear from Leibner’s survey is that there was a striking increase in settlements in the Early Roman period, which would correlate with a rapid increase in population. As Leibner states, during the period from the beginning of the first century BCE to the mid-first century CE, ‘settlement in the region underwent a dramatic change; numerous settlements were established; unsettled or sparsely settled areas, such as the eastern portion of the region or hilly areas with limited agricultural potential, experienced a wave of settlement; and the size of the settled are doubled’ (Leibner 2009: 333, italics mine). The point about building a settlement in an area with limited agricultural potential is very telling for assessments of overpopulation. It means that people were prepared to establish a settlement even when the arable land was poor, indicating the need for housing despite the likelihood of poor agricultural returns.

Josephus indicates that the large population was caused by Galilee being so fertile and abundant, with cultivations everywhere; but any environment reaches a breaking point when faced with human population growth. Even in a reasonably stable political and economic situation, a strain on arable land as a result of a high population could produce famine (see Acts 11.27-28 and Josephus, Ant. 20.49-53, 101) despite a very fertile environment.35

Crowds and multitudes following Jesus, then, could well be appropriately imagined as being a huge throng. A gathering of 5000 (Mk 5.30-44 = Mt. 14.13-21 = Lk. 9.10-17 = Jn. 6.1-13) or 4000 (Mk 8.1-10 = 15.32-39) is indicative of just how big a crowd was assembling when Jesus tried to go with his disciples to an isolated spot (Mk 6.32= Mt. Mt. 14.13).36 That they lacked food may have been the result not so much of their lack of foresight, but their lack of capacity.

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35. For famines, see Jensen 2012b: 307-24. Jensen’s critique of Reed seems appropriate in noting that Reed has identified in Galilee features that were common in the wider world and these do not necessarily require any new social instability (and see his previous work in Jensen 2012a). However, they would have contributed to longstanding stress.

36. Lk. 9.10 has Jesus and his disciples going to Bethsaida instead.
From modern analysis, it is clear that in an overpopulated environment there would have been a significant increase in the likelihood of disease spread, additional stress economically and practically, and an increase in the chances of falling into poverty through lack of work (Mora 2014); the waged day labourers of Jesus’ parables (e.g., Mt. 20.1-16) clearly reflect a social situation people knew. Unemployment is paired with pressure on the environment, and again, if comparable models in today’s world are applied, there would have been significant demand for food; it is likely that parts of Galilee were deforested along with the expansion of village settlements in the first century BCE, both for agricultural land and firewood (Kerr et al. 2004).

With expanding human population and settlements, the environment is also degraded and polluted. Evidence of a huge impact on the environment at this time can be found in the results of sedimentation analysis in the Magdala harbour area (Sarti et al. 2013: 120-31). The researchers note that, during the period of harbour activity, with massive development in the first century, trace metals were found, ‘which is consistent with anthropogenic pollution of the environment, probably linked to shipbuilding and boat insulation … high pollution levels at the base of the HFS [Harbour Foundation Sequence] were induced by harbour activities and a dense human frequentation’ (Sarti et al. 2013: 129).

The evidence of Jesus’ advice in Q 12.29-31 to his followers not to worry about what they would eat or wear would have been appropriate in a context in which there was a widespread fear of hunger and destitution. That Galilee was extremely fertile and agriculturally abundant in ancient times as now in fact sits uncomfortably with the concern for the poor and destitute exhibited in the gospels, particularly in Q and Luke. Why was there any poverty in a land of plenty? While scholars have looked to the imperial situation and a hierarchical social model as a major reason to explain Galilean poverty, it seems important to add to this the crucial factor of overpopulation, a factor clearly evident from our literary sources.

**Conclusion**

In this discussion I have offered some reflections on the historical Jesus brought to mind during the period of our current global crisis. I have considered what made Jesus news, and identified that his reputation as a healer was paramount. His actions attracted huge crowds, which points to widespread stress concerning health issues in the Galilee of Jesus’ time. In the case of Jesus being a healer, I have explored further what this actually meant, in a Galilee that was experiencing a chronic health crisis. I have considered the unusualness of Jesus’ healing involving affective touch, known to boost immune system responses. Finally, I have questioned the tendency to minimize Josephus’s population figures, by bringing in Philo. With this textual support and the archaeological
evidence, I have identified an overpopulation crisis in Galilee. This would also have increased social stress and ecological degradation. The method of hands-on healing by Jesus and his representatives took place in an environment in which people were densely packed, where disease could spread virulently. This makes it even more remarkable that Jesus and his disciples are not said to have come down with any diseases.

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