WHAT WOULD JESUS LEAD:
IDENTITY THEFT, LEADERSHIP EVOLUTION,
AND OPEN SYSTEMS

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Recent discussions of “What would Jesus drive?” by environmental groups have raised the issue of whether Jesus of Nazareth would embrace the industrial growth paradigm. This paper evaluates this public policy debate by examining various leadership typologies that have been used to study Jesus. Drawing upon Daft’s four-cell evolutionary theory of leadership studies, this paper lays out an open systems and postindustrial research agenda for leadership scholars as they examine Jesus’ actions within a first-century context.

On November 20, 2002, the Evangelical Environmental Network launched a public relations campaign in Detroit. Their director, Jim Ball, turned the popular question “What Would Jesus Do?” into the now-famous retort “What Would Jesus Drive?” Six months later, Ball and his wife Kara drove a Toyota Prius from Austin, Texas, to Washington, DC, to dramatize how creation care was a biblical mandate and not a “liberal claptrap cooked up by enviros to wreck the economy.”

Riding a wave of criticism about rising gas prices, the “gas-guzzling” sport utility vehicle (SUV) became demonized as “Axles of Evil,” in part responsible for American addiction to foreign oil and driving the Middle East conflict. Sales of SUVs began to plummet from their highs in the 1990s.

Not all evangelicals embraced Ball’s campaign or the moral support offered by the National Evangelical Association. As recent as March 2007, Dr. James Dobson and

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Gary Bauer warned this national body that their climate change initiative would distract America from conservative pro-life issues, such as opposing abortion and same-sex marriage.³

In a recent pre-Easter CNN special entitled, “What Would Jesus Do?,“ Pastor Frederick Douglas Haynes III expressed a frustration with the agenda of the Christian Right. He said, “Jesus has been crucified on a cross of identity theft...[he] has been de-radicalized, sanitized, to the point where he is totally divorced from the social, political and economic realities of his day.” Haynes claims we should not “con ourselves into limiting Jesus to certain pet moral issues.” He feels Jesus would be concerned about the budget deficit of the United States, the war in Iraq, and providing health care to nine million uninsured children, rather than just circumscribed issues.⁴

Whether among liberals or conservatives, Blue states or Red states, the question of leadership has never been more important. The debate over climate change, fuel economy, pro-life issues, and identity theft reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth will continue to animate our discussion of postindustrial leadership.⁵ In today’s pluralistic religious context we may not be able to develop a consensus on “What would Jesus drive?,” but we should be able to answer the question “What would Jesus lead?”

Despite this opportunity Ebertz views evangelical scholarship today as seriously deficient in its purported “worldview analysis.”⁶ Both outsiders, such as Gerzon,⁷ or insiders, such as Guinness⁸ and Noll,⁹ recognize it is deaf, mute, and dumb in regards to constructively shaping the future of U.S. society. Furthermore, most business or leadership books that appeal to Jesus—such as Jones' business trilogy,¹⁰ Tamasy's workplace spirituality book,¹¹ or Wilkes' leadership primer¹²—are so impoverished in understanding his first-century context that they tempt us to agree with Haynes’ charge of identity theft.

To fill this void, this paper draws upon Richard Daft’s evolutionary model of leadership studies to examine various ways in which scholars have understood Jesus’ leadership. An “open systems” research agenda is proposed to examine Jesus’ actions within the context of Second Temple Judaism and correlate this to twenty-first-century

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leadership issues of high performance management, industry transformation, and public policy.

I: The Evolution of Leadership

What was the nature of Jesus’ leadership? How did he influence those who followed him, as well as those who resisted his mode of covenantal renewal? Daft’s model of leadership evolution gives us four ways to think about how to study the leadership of Jesus.

Leadership research, according to Daft, has varied in terms of its scope—ranging from a macrofocus to a microfocus—as well as in terms of its environment—ranging from stable to chaotic. Putting these two dimensions together Daft offers four cells, as depicted in Figure 1, from which leadership theory can be conceptualized.

![Diagram of Richard Daft's model of leadership evolution]

**Figure 1. Richard Daft’s model of leadership evolution.**

*Macroleadership in a Stable World*

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In the lower left of Daft’s model we have macro-stable models of leadership. This corresponds to the era of “Great Man Leadership,” conceptualized as pre-industrial and prebureaucratic. During this era, scholars assumed that the innate qualities of exceptional leaders, along with the stable nature of society, made it possible for them to shape large endeavors, whether military, political, or religious. For the first half of the twentieth century, leadership in this quadrant was largely studied through trait research by focusing on personal characteristics that distinguish the leader.

Beyond leadership studies, the trait theory has also been amply applied to the historical Jesus, as Charlotte Allen illustrates. A century ago Albert Schweitzer cataloged attempts to study the life of Jesus, including the more noted works of Reimarus, Renan, and Strauss. While this approach no longer dominates Jesus studies, some scholars still labor under critical constraints to write a biography of Jesus. Witness the recent Rabbi Jesus by Bruce Chilton, a mix of historical and imaginary analysis.

Another approach in this era to study the leadership of Jesus is Max Weber’s theory of charismatic sovereignty. Weber conceived of popular charismatic authority as the antithesis of traditional and legal authority. Weber’s charismatic approach with respect to Jesus continues to be developed today by Hengel, Theissen, Ebertz, and others. Malina offers a critical and contemporary application of Weber’s theory to Jesus.

While the great charismatic leader à la Weber exudes confidence in his extraordinary abilities, thrives on power and glorification and, lacking ties to the established social order, seeks to effect its radical change, the great reputational, legitimate leader, exemplified in Jesus, affirms the traditional values and structures of his society.

In today’s climate of religious pluralism the prospects to study Jesus through the lens of heroic leadership appears naïve to most. Yet apart from Christology, one viable approach in this macro-stable quadrant would be to use Conger and Kanungo’s attribution theory of charismatic leadership and extend Weber’s widespread research tradition. By contrast, more contextual ways to study the leadership of Jesus have developed as scholars have researched leadership.

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Microleadership in a Stable World

In the upper left cell of Daft’s model we have micro-stable models of leadership. This corresponds to the era of rational management, marked by the emergence of hierarchy and bureaucracy. Defined by Frederick Taylor’s scientific management and Henry Ford’s assembly line, the rational manager was expected to plan, organize and control others using an impersonal approach. Employees were expected to maximize production by following the rules, let the boss think for them, and perform assigned tasks. Daft sees leadership in this quadrant as largely studied through behavioral and contingent theories.

While the rational system may appear to have little to do with Jesus’ leadership as a charismatic prophet, this frame fashioned nearly a half century of modern evangelical approaches to discipleship. The leader-disciple relationship was programmed from start to finish, beginning with follow-up and ending with disciple-making. This was particularly true for crusade evangelism and collegiate ministries, which conceptualized Jesus’ master plan for evangelism as a universal pattern of spiritual growth through social modeling. Jesus is seen as the consummate supervisor of new believers, bringing structure and stability through disciple-makers who coach and mentor them.

This focus on dyadic or supervisory leadership is not without parallel in leadership research. Gary Yukl summarizes his behavioral theory of leadership as encompassing a variety of theories, relating to (1) task-oriented, (2) relations-oriented, and (3) change-oriented practices of managers. Each of these dimensions could be used to study Jesus’ relationship to his followers, across a wide spectrum of microleadership models, including Blake and Mouton’s high-high leader, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson’s situational leader; or Dansereau’s vertical dyadic or individualized leadership theory. Examples of viewing Jesus as exhibiting microleadership in a stable world include books such as Briner and Pritchard’s The Leadership Lessons of Jesus or Manz’s The Leadership Wisdom of Jesus.

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Microleadership in a Chaotic World

In the upper right cell of Daft’s model we have micro-chaotic models of leadership. This corresponds to the era of team leadership, marked by worker empowerment, quality circles, and organizational downsizing. Daft claims the oil embargo of 1972 and growing global competition of the 1980s and 1990s left rational management practices in a state of confusion. Japan led through the fog by team leadership through the practice of total quality management. The leadership task was to improve performance in a chaotic world by maximizing frontline employee motivation and commitment.

The era of team leadership produced multiple theories of workplace empowerment such as (1) Kerr and Jermier’s substitute for leadership theory,31 (2) Manz and Sims’ theory of self-managing teams,32 or (3) servant leadership theory, conceptualized by Greenleaf33 and amplified by Patterson’s research model.34 Jesus is well known as developing his twelve apostles and the seventy laborers as self-organizing teams. Could Jesus’ team leadership be intentional in view of the prevailing chaos of his day?

Various popular leadership books have focused on Jesus’ team leadership such as Blanchard’s Leadership by the Book35 or Ford’s Transforming Leadership,36 yet none have examined his group leadership in an open systems context. Grenz and Franke37 claim that evangelicals have been slow to embrace postfoundational concepts that acknowledge chaos, complexity or an open future.

According to Dent, Christian philosophy and spirituality have instead preferred the stability of the traditional worldview (TWV), rather than the emerging worldview (EWV).38 The TWV is a closed-system worldview defined by reductionism, objective observation, logic, and determinism. This corresponds to the left side of Daft’s model. By contrast, the EMV is defined by holism, perspectival observation, paradox, and indeterminism. This corresponds to Daft’s model’s right side. While Dent seeks to show that faith is consistent with complexity theory and upward causation, few evangelicals look to Jesus as a paradoxical leader who acted at the edge of chaos. Daft’s third cell of team leadership is fresh territory for scholars, provided one examines Jesus in an open system framework.

Macroleadership in a Chaotic World

In the lower right cell of Daft's model we find macro-chaotic models of leadership. Daft claims this corresponds to the era of learning leadership. He sees this postindustrial era as one that calls leaders and followers to experiment, learn, and change, in both their personal and professional lives. Mary O'Hara-Devereaux refers to this leadership challenge as "navigating the Badlands."39 Given the pressure of both global business and global terrorism, organizations must learn how to thrive in a decade of radical transformation. Leaders must see their highest aim as creating horizontal, adaptable, and resilient organizations.

Daft's learning leadership cell corresponds to what Bryman40 calls the "new leadership theories" or neocharismatic theories. This includes Bass and Avolio's theory of transformational leadership,41 with its emphasis on leading through vision, values, and relationships rather than transactional exchange. It includes Fry's theory of spiritual leadership,42 given its emphasis on workplace spirituality and learning organizations.

Another theory central to this domain of learning leadership is Elliot Jaques' stratified-systems approach.43 This theory focuses on systemic or strategic leaders44 at the corporate and portfolio level of organizations. Jaques found that these executives operate in nearly unbounded business and social environments. They have time horizons of 20 years or longer that interact with complex, intercultural, and multinational forces.45 These executives intentionally shape organizational culture and carry out strategies as learning processes.46

Where are the studies that examine Jesus' macroleadership in a chaotic world with time spans of discretion that approach Jaque's findings? Is it possible now to study global leadership47 or the change organizations48 they lead in an open systems context that frames Jesus' leadership in the political tradition of James McGregor Burns?49 Jesus clearly released the adaptive learning that his followers needed to survive the clash of Hellenism and Judaism in his day. His global leadership was not only pivotal in

39 Mary O'Hara-Devereaux, Navigating the Badlands: Thriving in the Decade of Radical Transformation (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
44 Sydney Finkelstein and Donald C. Hambrick, Strategic Leadership: Top Executives and Their Effects on Organizations (West's Strategic Management Series) (Minneapolis/St. Paul: South-Western, 1996).
his day, it was significant to succeeding generations of Christians in reference to theological redemption.50

A key to examining Jesus’ macroleadership in a chaotic world is the recognized fact that Herodian or Second Temple Judaism was by no means stable after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE. This historical period up until CE 70 clearly falls in Daft’s lower right cell, as its fate was tied to macroforces. This tribal village-based Jewish society51 was faced with the exogenous challenge of militarization, urbanization, and commercialization brought by the Roman Empire.52 In response to these trends, Horsley and Hanson document the rival religious factions and Jewish insurgents who vied for power.53 Jesus approached this swirling chaos with fresh eyes, new sense-making lenses, and civilizational foresight.54 Yet his collective action was anchored in ancient tradition and restoration eschatology.55 Jesus led through both symbol and action to recalibrate the spiritual practices of his day (Matt 5:21-7:5, 21:12-13),57 beyond the impending collapse of his society,58 which traced its monarchy back a millennia to King David.

During a time where others saw the world as fixed, Jesus saw beyond the standing powers of his day and envisioned a new temple order not made by human hands.59 In keeping with self-sacrificial leadership theory,60 Jesus saw his death on the cross as taking up the chaos or “incomplete organizational design” that the body of Second Temple Judaism could not absorb (Matt 20:28; Mrk 10:45). Similar to the organizational theory of punctuated equilibrium,61 Jesus saw the covenant history of Israel in his time as a dynamic of creative destruction. Following his death his contemporaries would experience a short period of turbulence, followed by a long period of covenantal stability (Mrk 13:19). The prevailing leadership of Israel would be displaced (Matt 23:34-36; Luk 11:49-52) by those who followed his way (Matt 19:28-30, 23:34-36).

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In keeping with collective action social theory, Jesus was a “dissident entrepreneur” who would lead his nation through this time of turbulence into a renewed covenant (Matt 26:27-29; Mrk 14:24-25; Luk 22:20). This post-Herodian era would be marked by a new social economy with the Gentiles, who would also worship Yahweh (Matt 8:11-12, 12:41-42, 27:54, 28:19; John 4:21-24). Jesus considered his followers to be the vanguard of this new era. Their self-organizing teams would survive the Roman-Jewish War (Luk 19:41-44) and the end of the Second Temple—some forty years after his death.

This description of Jesus’ macroleadership in a chaotic world is at best partial. It suggests, however, that Jesus led more than just a dissident minority. He saw his microleadership of the twelve, the seventy, and the downtrodden (Luk 12:32) in the macrocontext of the reversal of power that marked the first century.

II: Conclusion

We come back to the question "What would Jesus lead?" Would Jesus lead Detroit to recreate the auto to drastically reduce carbon emissions and fuel dependency? Would he lead a pro-life demonstration at a local birth-control clinic? Would he lead a genetics research team? Would he lead a political party into the White House? Would he lead third-world dissidents, looking for cultural and economic relief from globalization? Conceivably, Jesus might lead any of these endeavors. Yet, this claim itself is a contextualized value statement. Each generation must wrestle with this question as they explore the various textures of the Christian scriptures through social rhetorical criticism applied to their context.

We may not all agree on what Jesus would lead, but we can say with unanimity that Jesus’ leadership would touch both the micro- and macrospheres. Therefore, in keeping with Daft’s model of evolutionary leadership, a research agenda related to Jesus’ leadership must rigorously think across multiple theoretical traditions and on multiple levels of analysis, including (1) the microlevel of social psychology, (2) the

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63 Ibid., 47.
66 This premise of Jesus’ contextual and global leadership in the first century needs further elaboration by leadership scholars. I develop this in a paper yet to be published—"The Future According to Jesus: Exploring a Galilean Model of Foresight." However, much more work can be done to specify why Jesus’ leadership was directed through his followers to the nation of Israel and to Hellenistic society as a whole.
mesolevel of organizational structure and change, and (3) the macrolevel of organizational ecology and resource dependency within industry change.\textsuperscript{70}

Furthermore, any leadership research agenda that aims to understand Jesus must aggressively ground itself, as Reed argues, behind the texts and beneath the stones of Jesus’ day.\textsuperscript{71} It must grapple with how Jesus encountered the chaos of his era and show how these guiding beliefs, intentions, and behaviors can help us tackle the disruptive changes of our time, whether through people-centered leadership, industry transformation, or public policy choices. Anything less than this full scholarly mission will leave our work open to charges of identity theft.

About the Author

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\textsuperscript{71} Jonathan L. Reed, \textit{Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence} (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000).