

JESUS, HISTORY AND THE GOSPELS¹S. Moyise²

ABSTRACT

This article considers the reasons why modern scholars have felt the need to go behind the four Gospels and search for the historical Jesus. After a short discussion on methodology, especially the criteria used to detect the earliest and most reliable traditions about Jesus, a number of recent proposals are discussed: Jesus as Jewish restoration prophet; Jesus as Galilean rabbi; Jesus as subversive reformer; Jesus as Jewish messiah. This diversity might suggest that the whole enterprise is misguided but there are positive gains for the Church, not least the recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus.

1. INTRODUCTION

The central claim of Christianity is that God was incarnate in the person of Jesus in order to bring salvation to the world. It is not simply an ideology or philosophy but is rooted in the belief that God has done something in history. Christianity is thus bound to be interested in what Jesus actually said and did and for much of Church history, it was assumed that this is what the Gospels tell us. However, that movement which we now call the Enlightenment challenged this, claiming that the Gospels tell us more about the beliefs of those who wrote them (in Greek) than the actual words spoken by Jesus (in Aramaic). The Jewish teacher from Nazareth was changed into the Gentile God of Christianity, putting into his mouth such doctrines as incarnation (Jn 17:5), trinity (Mt. 28:19), atonement (Mk. 10:45) and eternal life (Jn 3:16). The Gospels are not so much historical records of what Jesus said and did but *commentaries* or *reflections* on his significance for Christian faith. Some scholars (e.g. Bultmann) were quite happy with this conclusion, suggesting that Christianity is founded on the death and resurrection of Christ and has no need to know the details of Jesus' life. Indeed, Bultmann argues that those who search for the original words of Jesus are engaged in a form of "justification by works", seeking to ground their faith

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in objective historical research rather than living “by faith alone”. Other scholars, however, are unwilling to surrender the importance of the historical Jesus for the Christian faith, arguing that if Jesus was substantially different from what we have in the Gospels, then the Church can hardly claim to be his followers. This presents a difficulty, for even after two hundred years of rigorous historical study, there is no consensus on what Jesus was really like.

2. THE GOSPELS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In order to understand the quest for the historical Jesus, it is necessary to say something about the origins and reception of the Gospels. Of the four Gospels, Matthew and John had particular prominence in the early Church. Matthew was thought to be the earliest Gospel (that is why it appears first in the New Testament) and tells the story of a miraculous birth, baptism and temptation, a ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee, a journey to Jerusalem, a final supper with his disciples, a trial before Pilate and death by crucifixion. The Gospel ends with the tomb found empty and the risen Jesus commissioning his disciples to go and “make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-20). Matthew’s Gospel makes it particularly clear that Jesus intended to found a Church, which would carry on his work and preserve his teaching. His naming of precisely twelve disciples (a parallel to the twelve tribes of Israel) announces symbolically his intent to form a new community. He trains them by sending them out on missions (Mt. 10) and providing them with important teaching, delivered in five long discourses or sermons (Mt. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-5). He gives them instructions on how to settle disputes in the Church (Mt. 18) and says to Peter:

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Mt. 16:18-19).

John’s Gospel is rather different and was soon regarded as the most theological and profound of the Gospels. Instead of beginning with Jesus’ birth, it begins with the statement, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). The Word is identified in verse 14 as becoming flesh and in verse 17 as Jesus Christ, full of “grace and truth”. Not only does the Gospel claim that Jesus is God’s perfect representative, it also claims that Jesus is the incarnation of God and

since “No one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18), Jesus is the only way to God (Jn 14:6). After the prologue, the Gospel focuses on a number of significant encounters that show that Jesus is able to speak on God’s behalf because he is God’s Son (Jn 5:17-18). Jesus’ death is not so much a travesty of injustice but the means by which he returns to the Father, having accomplished all that he set out to do (Jn 17:4). He ends his life not with Matthew’s cry of despair (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) but the confident, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30).

Mark’s Gospel, although regarded in the second-century (Papias) as a summary of Peter’s preaching, came to be seen as an abbreviation of Matthew (about 90% of Mark can be found in Matthew) and thus fell into neglect. After all, if Matthew is being read throughout the Church year, readings from Mark would simply duplicate the same stories. As a result, there are only a few extant commentaries on Mark from the first thousand years of its history. The author of Luke’s Gospel was identified as the physician and travelling companion of Paul (Col. 4:14), but was not himself an apostle or an eye-witness to Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 1:1-4). Thus, to a large degree, the Church’s picture of Jesus was based on Matthew and John, and after several centuries of reflection and debate, was summarised at the council of Chalcedon (451 CE) in a “remarkable balancing act of near-contradictory affirmations and denials” (Ford & Highton 2002:100) in the following words:

This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, distinctly, inseparably, and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one person and subsistence.

3. THE BIRTH OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

3.1 Matthew is not the earliest Gospel

The received view from Augustine onwards was that Matthew was the earliest Gospel and Mark its abbreviation. This made sense, since Mark was much shorter than Matthew and omitted much of its teaching. But historical critics soon noticed that when Matthew and Mark are telling the same story, it is more often Mark’s account that is the longer (e.g. compare the story of the Gadarene demoniac in Mt. 8:28-34 and Mk 5:1-20). On the other hand, large sections of Matthew’s Gospel are not found in Mark (e.g.

infancy stories, sermon on the mount, the Lord's prayer, resurrection appearances) and it is difficult to imagine why Mark would have omitted them. Thus a new consensus emerged that Mark was the earliest Gospel (c. 66-70 CE), which Matthew expanded by adding the infancy stories at the beginning (Mt. 1-2), blocks of teaching in the middle (Mt. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-5) and resurrection appearances at the end (Mt. 28), while eliminating unnecessary detail (as in the Gadarene story). Because about 200 verses of this extra material also appears in Luke, scholars had to decide whether Matthew or Luke used each other or whether they were both drawing on a common source. The majority opted for the latter, designating the source by the letter Q (from the German *Quelle*) and suggesting that it predates Mark by 10-15 years. Matthew and Luke were thought to have been written in the 80s or 90s.

3.2 John is not a historical source for the life of Jesus

The other major conclusion was that John's Gospel is more like a theological reflection than an historical account. Thus according to Matthew, Mark and Luke (known as the Synoptic Gospels), Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God and ministered in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee. It was during his one and only visit to Jerusalem, especially the incident with the money-changers, that provoked the wrath of the authorities and resulted in his crucifixion. He rarely spoke about himself ("No one is good but God alone" — Mk 10:18) but encouraged people to turn back to God before it was too late. John's Gospel, however, is quite different. After the theological prologue in John 1, chapter 2 opens with the incident in the temple and has Jesus making regular trips to Jerusalem (Jn 2:13; 5:1; 7:14; 12:12). His teaching focuses on his relationship with God. He rarely speaks about the kingdom of God (only to Nicodemus in Jn 3:3,5) and urges people to put their faith in him. A second consensus at the end of the nineteenth century was that John's Gospel is not an historical source for reconstructing the words and deeds of Jesus but a later reflection on his theological and spiritual significance. Indeed, Clement of Alexandria (c 200 CE) had already noticed this difference:

Last of all, aware that the physical facts had been recorded in the gospels, encouraged by his pupils and irresistibly moved by the Spirit, John wrote a spiritual gospel (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6:14).

3.3 Jesus according to Mark's Gospel

The result of these theories was enormous. After centuries of neglect, Mark now became the focus of attention as the earliest Gospel and it proved to be a puzzling document. For example, it was commonly assumed that Jesus told parables in order to make his message clear. It was one of the things that singled out Jesus as a great teacher and communicator. But in Mark 4:12, Jesus tells his disciples that the reason he tells parables is so that the people, "may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven". It is clear from each of the Gospels that some people found Jesus' teaching hard to understand. But the idea that he deliberately made it difficult for them by speaking in riddles and parables seems preposterous. Yet this is what Mark has Jesus say and his is the earliest Gospel (Marsh & Moyise 1999:14-25).

In an extremely influential study, the German scholar William Wrede (1901) pointed out that, far from trying to persuade people that he was the Son of God, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel discourages his disciples from talking about him and tells those that are healed not to tell anyone. Furthermore, far from being what most people expect of the perfect Son of God, Mark's Jesus shows anger, ignorance, fear and despair. The following are a few extracts from Mark's Gospel that offered a surprising image of Jesus (emphasis added):

Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them *with anger*, he was grieved at their hardness of heart (Mk 3:4-5)

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father (Mk 13:32)

And he said to them, '*I am deeply grieved*, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, *he threw himself on the ground* and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; *remove this cup from me*, yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mk 14:34-6)

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*' (Mk 15:34)

Another surprise was that the Jesus of Mark apparently shared the apocalyptic view that a great catastrophe was imminent. Mark opens the public ministry of Jesus by saying that he came into Galilee proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15). Later, Jesus solemnly says to the dis-

iples, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mk 9:1). And in Mark 13, often designated “the little Apocalypse”, Jesus says the “sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven” (Mk 13:24) and then adds, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mk 13:30). Though there is debate as to the meaning of this language, it is clear that Jesus did not envisage 2000 years of Church history. Thus the Jesus of Mark turned out to be an enigmatic figure, very different from what was being proclaimed by the Church.

3.4 Later Gospels changed Mark’s picture of Jesus

If Mark’s Gospel is the earliest, then the implication is that the later Gospels have to some extent changed (some would say distorted) the picture of Jesus. For example, if we consider the manner in which Jesus died, Mark (and Matthew) have only one saying from the cross and it is full of foreboding: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34/Mt. 27:46). But in Luke’s account, there are three sayings from the cross and all of them are positive. The first is the forgiveness saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). The second is the promise to the penitent thief that “today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). This is intended to comfort the penitent thief but also reveals Jesus’ own confidence. Far from feeling forsaken by God, he fully expects to be in God’s presence that very day. The third and final saying in Luke is the reverent sounding, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46). In short, far from the forsaken sufferer of Mark and Matthew, Luke presents Jesus as going to his death in confidence and trust. John does likewise, offering three different sayings from the cross but all of them positive, ending with the supremely confident, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30).

4. THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

4.1 Schweitzer and Weiss

In 1901, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book charting the various attempts to write a life of Jesus, from Reimarus (1778) to Wrede (1901). The English translation of Schweitzer’s book was entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) and this became the name for that branch of study that seeks to go behind the Gospels in order to reconstruct what Jesus actually said and did. Schweitzer himself followed the apocalyptic interpretation of the German

scholar Johannes Weiss, who in 1882, published a brief but influential book (translated in 1971 as *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*). During the nineteenth century, the dominant understanding of Jesus' sayings about the kingdom of God was moral. God's kingdom would come when people submitted to God's rule in their lives and societies followed Christ's teachings (hence the importance of missionary work in the nineteenth century). Weiss, however, drew attention to apocalyptic works which envisage a cataclysmic intervention by God to establish a new heaven and a new earth. The Old Testament contains examples of this type of writing in Isaiah and Ezekiel but it is the book of Daniel where it is particularly prominent. The historical setting of the first part of the book is the time when Israel was in exile (sixth century BCE), but the second half of the book (Dan. 7-12) consists of a set of visions that scholars date to the troubled times of the second century BCE. Daniel sees four beasts rising from the sea, which are interpreted to mean a succession of empires (Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, Roman). Weiss argued that this is the proper background for understanding Jesus' proclamation of the coming kingdom.

Schweitzer agreed. Jesus did not envisage a gradual process whereby the world would become a better place. He envisaged a cataclysmic intervention of God, by which evil would be eradicated and God's kingdom established. This is why Jesus spoke with such urgency; there is simply no time left for the ordinary things of life. Thus when a would-be-disciple asks if he can first bury his father, Jesus tells him to "let the dead bury their own dead" (Mt. 8:22). The man must ignore the basic decencies of life because time is running out. Neither should family concerns hold a person back for, "whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26). Schweitzer's explanation for these "hard" sayings is that they are only understandable if Jesus is seen as an apocalyptic visionary, who believed that the end was imminent. Otherwise, such sayings can only be regarded as offensive and would lead to anarchy.

4.2 Criteria for determining authentic traditions

Although scholars largely agreed that Mark was the earliest Gospel, they did not assume that everything in Matthew and Luke was necessarily later than everything in Mark. As we have noted, they believed that Matthew and Luke supplemented Mark by drawing on other sources (notably Q), which are earlier than Mark. As a result, much energy was spent in establishing criteria to distinguish between early and late traditions in the Gospels. For example, sayings of Jesus that sound too "churchy" are to be con-

sidered suspect. They could be original but are more likely to be embellishments by preachers and teachers trying to apply Jesus' teaching to their own (very different) situation. By contrast, sayings that appear awkward or embarrassing for the Church are likely to be authentic, for it is very unlikely that the Church would invent material that it then had to explain or defend. A good example of this is Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. All four Gospels mention this (in John it is by implication), but Matthew has an interesting dialogue between Jesus and John:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented (Mt 3:13-15).

Not surprisingly, Jesus' baptism was awkward for the early Church because (1) People naturally assume that the lesser person is baptised by the more senior; and (2) John's baptism was a call for sinners to repent. Matthew answers these difficulties by providing a dialogue where John recognises Jesus' superiority but is ordered by Jesus to continue. Matthew thus shows Jesus to be John's superior and offers a reason for why he submitted to John's baptism. Most scholars are sceptical that such a convenient dialogue took place (it is only found in Matthew's Gospel) but it does serve to confirm the historicity of Jesus' baptism. The Church would not invent an incident that it then had to explain or defend.

4.3 What can be known of the Historical Jesus?

The American scholar E.P. Sanders wrote an extremely influential book called *Jesus and Judaism*, where he lists eight such events in Jesus' life that pass the most stringent historical criteria and can safely be regarded as fact (in so far as any historical event can be regarded as fact). These are (1985:11):

- Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist.
- Jesus was a Galilean who preached and healed.
- Jesus called disciples and spoke of there being twelve.
- Jesus confined his activity to Israel.
- Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple.
- Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities.
- After his death, Jesus' followers continued as an identifiable movement.

- At least some Jews persecuted at least parts of the new movement.

As raw data, this does not tell us very much about the meaning or significance of Jesus, though it does confirm the general outline of the Synoptic Gospels. The critical question in recent scholarship has been, How do we put these basic “facts” into a framework that allows a coherent picture of Jesus to emerge? Some have tried to do this by reference to known groups within Judaism, such as rabbis, prophets, zealots, mystics or healers. Others have tried to work backwards from the beliefs of the early Church, arguing that there must have been something in what Jesus said and did to generate such understandings. A key question for all positions is the relationship between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of John. All four Gospels cite Isaiah 40:3 (“Prepare the way of the Lord”) as an explanation for John’s ministry, along with a saying that distinguishes between John’s baptism with/in water and the coming one’s baptism with/in Spirit. All three Synoptic Gospels present John’s message as repentance in the light of the coming kingdom, expanded in Matthew and Luke as the day of God’s wrath when he will “gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17). Matthew clearly thinks that Jesus began with John’s message as he uses identical wording to summarise it (Mt. 3:2; 4:17), but the stories that follow suggest that Jesus soon found his own voice (e.g. Mt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34). As we will see in the next section, Sanders thinks that Jesus dropped the call to repentance and Mack, Crossan and Borg think he dropped the apocalyptic urgency.

5. MODERN RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

5.1 Jesus as Jewish Restoration Prophet

According to Sanders, Jesus took over from John the belief that God was about to intervene in history and establish his kingdom. Like John, his ministry focused on Israel (Mt. 10:6) and though he occasionally came into contact with Gentiles (Mk 7:24-30; Mt. 8:10), was reluctant to include them (Mk 7:27; Mt. 10:5). He chose precisely twelve disciples in order to echo the sort of hopes expressed in Ben Sira 36:11 and *Psalms of Solomon* 17:28-31 that God would one day gather the lost tribes of Israel. However, unlike John the Baptist, Jesus did not tell sinners to repent but ate with them and promised them a place in the coming kingdom. Sanders acknowledges that Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17 say that Jesus did preach repentance but he thinks that (1) the stories that follow do not bear this out; and (2) had

Jesus done so, he would not have been criticised for eating with sinners. It was because he ate with sinners *without* requiring repentance that was offensive.

Nevertheless, Jesus himself not only upheld the moral dictates of the Law; he also upheld its ritual requirements (Mk 1:44). The occasional disputes about healing on the Sabbath only serve to reinforce the general point, that Jesus was known to be law-abiding (the statement in Mk 7:19 that Jesus declared all foods clean is clearly a later gloss). Why then was Jesus crucified? The obvious deduction from the Synoptic Gospels is because he overturned the tables of the money-changers (Mk 11:18) and spoke about the destruction of the temple (Mk 13:20). The mention of blasphemy at the trial (Mk 14:64) has misled scholars into thinking the reasons for the crucifixion were theological (i.e. what Jesus claimed about himself) but it is quite clear that Caiaphas was simply finding a way to justify what he had already decided to do. Thus according to Sanders (1993:261),

Jesus probably thought that in the new age, when the twelve tribes of Israel were again assembled, there would be a new and perfect Temple, built by God himself.

Jesus is best seen as a Jewish restoration prophet.

5.2 Jesus as a Galilean rabbi

Chilton points out that the title most frequently used to address Jesus in the Gospels is “rabbi” (e.g. Mk 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45). Scholars have been reluctant to see Jesus as a rabbi because he differs from the official Rabbis of later Judaism (Chilton’s use of lower case rabbi is deliberate). But once we see him as a “local sage”, then his “teaching, calling disciples to learn from one’s example, discussing issues of purity, even healing” (1996: 105) all become understandable. This is what local rabbis did. Chilton agrees with much of what Sanders says but offers a different perspective on the matter of purity. For example, he calls the incident in the Temple an “occupation” rather than a “judgement” and believes it is linked to a recent innovation by Caiaphas that allowed the sale of sacrificial animals within the Temple precincts. Like his contemporary Rabbi Hillel, Jesus opposed this innovation because it broke the connection between the worshipper and his own unblemished offering. Jesus was not staging a protest against the sacrificial system nor protesting against materialism or corruption. Jesus’ concern was for a pure offering (the title of Chilton’s book is *Pure offering: Jesus’ vision of God*). He says (1996:123),

only those after 70 CE who no longer treasured the Temple in Jerusalem as God's house could (mis)take Jesus' position to be an unqualified prophecy of doom or a global rejection to sacrifice.

The fact that Jesus was not arrested immediately is significant. He had not committed a crime worthy of death but simply staged a protest about a recent innovation in Temple practice. Jesus' arrest only happened when Judas reported to the officials the details of the last supper (as we call it). Why was this significant? Because during that supper, Jesus' actions over the bread and wine were interpreted as replacing purchased animals for the pure offerings that the Law requires. Thus Chilton (1996:125) concludes:

Jesus claimed that wine and bread were a better sacrifice than what was offered in the Temple, a foretaste of the new wine in the kingdom of God. At least wine and bread were Israel's own, not tokens of priestly dominance. No wonder the opposition to him, even among the twelve ... became deadly. In essence, Jesus made his meals into a rival altar.

5.3 Jesus as Social Reformer

Mack claims that Jesus' itinerant lifestyle, subversive teaching and call to forsake family and material goods would have made him look like a wandering Cynic philosopher. The origins of Cynicism are disputed but appear to go back to the fourth century BCE. It advocated a simple lifestyle, dependency on the hospitality of listeners, forsaking of possessions and family ties and criticism of the rich and powerful through aphorisms and pithy sayings. Mack suggests that this is precisely the picture of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) and the mission discourse (Mt. 10), where Jesus gives the disciples an "etiquette for unashamed begging" (1997:32). The significance of finding this picture in these two blocks of teaching is that both come from Q, our earliest source for the life of Jesus. Thus Mack suggests that the apocalyptic Jesus found in Mark and copied by Matthew and Luke (but not John) comes from the fervour of the early Church (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:15), not Jesus.

The person who has written most extensively on this type of portrait of Jesus is John Dominic Crossan (1991, 1994). Crossan agrees that Jesus is to be seen as a Cynic but believes his peasant rural background led to significant differences. For example, the command not to take provisions (Mt. 10:9) is intended to convey "communal dependency" rather than "itinerant self-sufficiency". The miracles, so often used by Christians to prove Jesus' divinity or messiahship, are actually concerned with social integration. Jesus touches the untouchables, heals them of their infirmities and reinte-

grates them into society. Crossan acknowledges that John the Baptist aimed his apocalyptic preaching at Israel but thinks that the Galilean Jesus turned his back on this. According to Crossan, our earliest and most reliable traditions about Jesus see him as a subversive social reformer.

Borg also sees Jesus as a social reformer but more in line with the Old Testament prophets than Cynic philosophers. He points out that the prophets were not stargazers predicting the end of the world but contemporary critics of immoral leadership. Their burning concern was justice and compassion rather than purity and separation (Hos. 6:6). Thus for Borg, the incident in the Temple was not about purity (Chilton) or restoration (Sanders) but “is most plausibly seen as a protest against the temple as the center of an exploitative social-economic system” (1994:115). Borg does not think that Jesus had Cynic connections but was an “Elijah-type figure: an ecstatic with paranormal religious experience, a healer, and a social prophet” (1994:117).

5.4 Jesus as Restoration Prophet and Messiah

Wright sides with Sanders that Jesus is best seen as a Jewish restoration prophet but believes we can go further by (1) interpreting Jesus’ teaching and symbolic actions in the light of Israel’s story of exile and redemption; and (2) interpreting the data in light of what followed, namely, the birth of the Church. Thus according to Wright, Jesus not only announced the coming of God (as one would expect of a prophet), he also enacted it. His appointment of twelve disciples, his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (in fulfilment of Zech. 9:9), his symbolic act in the Temple court (in fulfilment of Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11) and his sharing of a final Passover meal (a feast commemorating God’s liberation from slavery) all point to his own Messianic consciousness. This is not to equate Jesus’ Messianic consciousness with all that later Christians came to understand by that term. In particular, Wright does not think Jesus spoke of his second coming. When Jesus spoke of masters and kings returning after a journey (Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:11-27) he was thinking of Israel’s exile and God’s return in judgement. As is clear from the other parables in Matthew 25, the focus is

not on the personal return of Jesus after a long interval in which the church is left behind, but on the great judgment which is coming very soon upon Jerusalem and her current leaders (1996:636).

However, this discrepancy only serves to underline the historicity of the main point — that Jesus believed he was embodying in his own person the long-awaited coming of God to restore Israel and judge her enemies.

Wright agrees with Borg and Crossan that Jesus did not predict the imminent end of the world but for a very different reason. Borg and Crossan do not think such sayings are authentic but come from the early Church. Wright thinks they are authentic but have been fundamentally misunderstood by Schweitzer and others. Apocalyptic language (stars falling to earth, moon turning to blood) is not to be taken literally, as if it were a description of a “cosmic meltdown”, but in its prophetic sense (see Isa. 34:4) of a catastrophic judgement *within history*. Thus Wright says of Jesus (1996:653):

His messianic vocation included within it the vocation to attempt certain tasks which, according to scripture, YHWH had reserved for himself. He would take upon himself the role of messianic shepherd, knowing that YHWH had claimed this role as his own. He would perform the saving task which YHWH had said he alone could achieve. He would do what no messenger, no angel, but only the ‘arm of YHWH’, the presence of Israel’s god, could accomplish.

6. CONCLUSION

The cynic (in the modern sense) might conclude from the above that since modern scholars cannot agree on what Jesus was really like, the whole enterprise is pointless; we would be better off simply trusting the Gospels. However, for those who take seriously the differences between the Gospels, this is not an option. Jesus either openly proclaimed his divinity (John), set out to establish a Church (Matthew), and died in confidence that he was returning to the Father (Luke, John); or he did not (Mark). Historical critics suggests that he did not make such explicit claims, even if Wright is correct in arguing that many of them are implicit. Historical critics regard such claims as Christian interpretations of what Jesus said and did, based on insights gained from the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit. Readers might be surprised to learn that John’s Gospel makes a similar claim:

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him (Jn 12:16).

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come (Jn 16:13).

The author of John’s Gospel no doubt believed that both verses applied to himself and so he can offer understandings and interpretations that were not evident at the time. Christians will naturally place a great deal of importance on these later interpretations since they are authorised by the Church. But there is a danger of falling into a form of docetism, whereby

Jesus is understood as a set of ideas (or doctrinal concepts) rather than an historical person. Thus despite the many differences in the presentations discussed above, they all agree that Jesus must be understood as a Jew rather than a Christian. He worshipped the God of Israel, kept the laws of purity and sacrifice, attended the great festivals in Jerusalem and gained his understanding of the scriptures from the synagogue. And so did his first disciples (Acts 3:1; 10:14; 21:20). It is surely an irony that some of those who most loudly proclaim the importance of the incarnation have so little interest in the Jewishness of Jesus.

Most of the views discussed above also suggest that Jesus was much more “political” than is commonly believed. He did not come with a blueprint for change or attempt to form a political party but he did have much to say about the inequalities of life and the abuse of power. Christians have often read the Gospels in the light of their own concerns about atonement, salvation and church. But Jesus’ message was about the coming of God’s kingdom, not how individuals are “saved”. Though the scholars discussed above have their own explanations for what finally triggered Jesus arrest and death, the crucifixion stands as a reminder of political power. As Keck (2001:126) puts it, “the trial narratives . . . show that Jesus was put to death deliberately by persons in power, religious as well as imperial”. The fact that Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate is a constant reminder that it has political as well as religious significance.

Lastly, we must address the question, Do we have to choose between the “Christ of faith” and the “Christ of history”? Those that answer, Yes, are of two kinds. There are those whose interest is history and wish to assert that the “Christ of faith” does not tell us what actually happened but what the apostles came to believe. Second, there are those whose interest is theology, who wish to assert that the Christian faith is based on apostolic doctrine, not the particulars of Jesus’ gender, race, personality or social standing. Those that answer, No, either assert that the “Christ of faith” is identical to the “Christ of history” (effectively denouncing the Quest as wholly mistaken) or argue that the former simply makes explicit (e.g. Christ’s divinity) what was otherwise implicit (e.g. Jesus’ sense of sonship). I have some sympathy with the first (I do not think the Gospels are transcripts of what happened) and the fourth (I do think there is a connection between what happened and what was believed). By maintaining both in some sort of creative tension (like freedom and providence), one is kept from the extremes (i.e. that the Gospels are completely unhistorical, or that everything claimed by the later Church was implicitly said by Jesus). Christianity must surely be interested in what Jesus was really like and historical criticism is our only access to

that. But we should not underestimate the developments that took place as a result of the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit. Revelation does not begin and end with Jesus' life, as John 12:16 and 16:13 make clear. Christianity depends both on historical event and ongoing revelation.

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