

The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology*

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The quest for the historical Jesus began as a protest against traditional Christian dogma, but when the supposedly “neutral” historians peered into the well, all they saw was a featureless Jesus. Even when scholars decided that other biblical figures—John the Baptist, the evangelists, Paul, the “Q” people, and so on—were at home in a richly-storied and symbolic world. Jesus himself was not allowed to act symbolically, to criticize his contemporaries, to think theologically, to reflect on his own vocation, or to evoke any of the various meta-narratives with which his Jewish world was replete. At this point objectivist historiography begins to eat its own tail; it has now decided that it dislikes the taste, which is hardly surprising.

So what are we doing now, talking about the historical Jesus and Christian theology? We are taking Hermann Reimarus’s challenge seriously: investigate Jesus and see whether Christianity is not based on a mistake.¹ We are taking Albert Schweitzer’s challenge seriously: put Jesus within apocalyptic Judaism and watch bland unthinking dogma shiver in its shoes.² If this is too dangerous, escape routes are available. First, Wilhelm Wrede: Mark is theological fiction, and Jesus is a non-apocalyptic, teasing teacher.³ This is alive and well over one hundred years later. Second, Martin Kähler: the true Christ is a Christ of faith detached from the Jesus of history.⁴ This, too, is alive and well today. The church may urge this latter escape route, part of the academic guild may urge the former. Both should be resisted. Instead, we should accept both Reimarus’ challenge and Schweitzer’s proposal.

Schweitzer’s account of apocalyptic must, however, be seriously modified. First-century Jewish apocalyptic, is not the same as “end-of-the-world.” Instead, it invests major events within history with their theological significance. It looks, specifically, for the unique and climactic moment in—not the abolition of—Israel’s long historical story. We must: renounce literalism, whether fundamentalist or scholarly. Apocalyptic is the symbolic and richly-charged language of protest, affirming that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven—not in some imagined heavenly realm to be created after the present world has been destroyed. In particular, apocalyptic is the language of revolution: not that YHWH will destroy the world, but that he will act dramatically within it to bring Israel’s long night of suffering to an end, to usher in the new day in which peace and justice will reign.⁵

“Apocalyptic” therefore is the natural context for a truly subversive “wisdom.” Wisdom and folly within this worldview are not abstract or timeless. They consist in recognizing (or failing to recognize) that the long-awaited moment is now arriving. Apocalyptic and wisdom fit snugly together, and are mutually reinforcing. One of the major critical tools proposed by Wrede’s contemporary successors is, therefore, shown to be blunt beyond all usefulness.

When we make the adjustments required by this historical redefinition of “apocalyptic,” the major division in contemporary Jesus studies is clear. The current debate, though far more complex, is essentially comprehensible as a re-run of Wrede’s “consistent skepticism” against Schweitzer’s “consistent eschatology.” John Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar offer a non-apocalyptic Jesus: not just a Jesus who did not expect the end of the space-time universe, but a Jesus who did not think that Israel’s long and checkered story was now reaching its dramatic and decisive climax.⁶ I take the other view, claiming descent from Schweitzer. While agreeing that Jesus did not expect the end of the space-time world, I insist, like E. P. Sanders and many others, that Jesus was not a religious reformer but an eschatological prophet.⁷ Like other first-century eschatological prophets—and messianic or quasi-messianic figures—Jesus really did believe that Israel’s God was acting through him and his movement to do for Israel at last what the prophets had promised.

What, more precisely, was that? With the Exodus as their symbolic and narrative backdrop, the prophets declared that Israel would be released from the bondage that had begun with Babylon and that continued into Jesus’ own day. Nobody in Jesus’ day would have claimed that the visions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel had yet been fulfilled. The Babylons of this world would be defeated, and Israel would be free. And this real “return from exile”—that is, this complete liberation—would, of course, involve the return of YHWH to Zion. Prophet after prophet says so; nowhere in Second-Temple literature does anyone claim that it has actually happened. The prophets, moreover, interpreted the exile as the punishment: for

Israel's sin; the end of exile would, therefore, be "the forgiveness of sins." It would mean Israel's redemption, evil's defeat, and YHWH's return. All of this can be summed up in a single phrase: "the kingdom of God."⁸

Where does Jesus belong on this map, and what effect does this have on Christian theology? I have set out elsewhere a worldview model focusing on praxis, story, symbol, and question, leading to aims and beliefs.⁹ When we apply this to Jesus, it produces the following analysis.

First, Jesus exemplified the praxis of a prophet. He was known as a prophet; he spoke of himself as a prophet. He was both an oracular prophet and a leadership prophet. His movement grew out of that of John the Baptist, who was also a prophetic figure. Both men were clearly eschatological prophets. They were not merely visionary teachers. They were not merely advocating subversive wisdom or behavior. They were announcing, in symbol and narrative, that Israel's story was reaching the point for which Israel had longed. Second, Jesus' stories—not just his parables but his whole announcement—consisted at bottom of this: the time had arrived. To say "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) was to supply the missing line in the story that many wanted to hear. To speak of the return of a disgraced young son (Luke 15:11-32), and to use that as the validation of open and celebratory commensality (Luke 15:1-2), was to claim that table-fellowship as the embodiment of the real return from exile. To speak of the fall of the house (Matt. 7:26-27) evoked the theme of evil's defeat. To speak of the master returning after a long absence (Luke 19:11-27) hinted strongly at YHWH's return to Zion. These were among Jesus' characteristic kingdom-stories.

The stories did, however, have a twist for which Jesus' listeners were unprepared. Like all kingdom-stories of the time, they invited Herod and Pilate, Caesar, and Caiaphas to tremble in their beds. If Israel's God was going to become king, all other rulers would be demoted. Like most kingdom-stories of the time, moreover, they also offered a critique of other kingdom-stories. If the Pharisees' kingdom-story was correct, the Essenes' was not, and vice versa. Jesus' kingdom-story, like all others, was doubly subversive: subversive of the great empires and their representatives, but subversive also alternative Jewish kingdom-stories.

Still within Jesus' narrative world, there are two other points to be made. First, Jesus invited his hearers to become part of the story. His radical narrative summoned all and sundry to celebrate with him the real return from exile, the real forgiveness of sins. He was offering the latter precisely because he was enacting the former. This is eschatology, not reform. Jesus' so-called "ethics" belong just here: they were part of the story, the story of what God's renewed Israel would look like. Like other Jewish leaders before and since, Jesus was urging his contemporaries to follow turn in the subversive way of peace. He was radically opposed to the way of ultra-orthodoxy, of violent nationalist revolution. This was not, of course, because he was supporting the status quo (or was "non-political"), but precisely because he was not.

Second, Jesus warned his contemporaries that failure to come his way would result in ruin. He stood in the great tradition of Israel's prophets, notably Elijah and Jeremiah. His story had two possible endings between which his hearers had to choose. If they followed his way, the way of peace, they would be the light of the world, the city set on a hill that could not be hidden. If they went the other way, as Jesus saw many of his contemporaries eager to do, they would call down on themselves the wrath of Rome. Jesus, like Amos or Jeremiah, warned that Rome's wrath would constitute God's wrath. To follow his teachings, his subversive wisdom, would be the only way to build the house on the rock. To follow the raise prophets who were leading Israel into nationalist revolution would cause the house to fall with a great crash.

After praxis and story, symbol. Consider Jesus' work in relation to the regular Jewish symbols one by one. *Family*: Jesus regarded his followers as a fictive kinship group, subverting normal family loyalty, which was ultimately loyalty to the people. *Land*: Jesus urged his followers to abandon their possessions, which in his world mostly meant land. *Torah*: Jesus acted and spoke with a sovereign authority, and challenged in particular the two symbols—Sabbath and food—which distinguished Galilean Jews from their pagan neighbors. *Temple*: Jesus symbolically enacted its destruction, recognizing that its guardians, and the people as a whole, had refused his way of peace. He constructed his own alternative Jewish worldview (as, *mutatis mutandis*, the Essenes had done) around key symbolic actions and styles. In his case these were: healings, which were seen by some as subversive and "magical"; open and restive table-

fellowship; the call of the twelve; the offer of the eschatological gift of forgiveness; the redefined family; and, of course, his own agenda and vocation. Jesus' critique of his contemporaries' use of traditional symbols came together in his action in the Temple (Mark 14:12-25) and the symbols of his own work in the Last Supper. These two actions belong together and interpret each other.

Does all this mean that Jesus was in some sense anti-Jewish? Of course not. Was Elijah anti-Jewish for telling his contemporaries that they were under judgment? Were the Essenes anti-Jewish for denouncing the present Temple and its rulers, or for attacking the Pharisees? The debate, like some tragic current debates, is essentially "inner-Jewish." Once again, Jesus' critique was based not on religion but on eschatology. Jesus did not "speak against the law"—as though he were a Lutheran born out of due time. He did not regard the symbols of Israel's worldview as bad, shabby, offensive, strange, or representative of a wrong sort of religion—as though he were a nineteenth- or twentieth-century liberal. Nor did he simply offer a new option to be chosen by those who fancied it—as, though he were a postmodernist. He claimed that the day had arrived in which the God-given Mosaic dispensation was being overtaken the *eschaton*, and this was highlighted for him by the fact that he saw the God-given symbols of Temple, Torah, land, and family being used to undergird the ultra-orthodox zeal for revolutionary violence, Jesus' work aroused opposition, not in the form of an intra-Pharisaic dialogue about the finer points of Torah, but in the form of a radical clash, of agendas. We of all people ought not to be surprised if zealous students of Torah turn violent against someone who advocates peace at the cost of ancestral land.

Jesus' praxis, stories, and symbols thus indicate his answers, implicit and sometimes explicit, to the five major worldview questions. Who are we? Jesus and his followers form the real return-from-exile people, the remnant, the seed, the little flock. Where are we? We are in the land, though still slave, but our God will make us inherit the earth. What time is it? The hour of crisis, the great tribulation through which the kingdom will come, the long-awaited moment when the Exodus will be re-enacted, when exile will end, evil will be defeated, and YHWH will return to Zion. What is wrong? Evil is rampant not merely within paganism but within Israel: from the oppressive regime of the chief priests to the populist revolutionary movements, the world's evil has radically infected Israel also. What is the solution? Everything we know about Jesus suggests that in his heart of hearts he gave the answer: "I am."

But how? Without in any way psychologizing Jesus, we can as historians attempt to understand the network of motivation—and even of vocation—that seems to have been present to him. We can move, in other words, from a worldview to specific aims and beliefs.

First, Jesus believed he was Israel's messiah, the one through whom YHWH would restore the fortunes of his people. The word "messiah" had, of course, nothing to do with trinitarian or incarnational theology. Simon and Athronges had been hailed as messiahs when Jesus was a boy. The Sicarii regarded Menahem as messiah until a rival group killed him. Simeon ben Kosiba was hailed by Akiba as "son of the star." Presumably, they all regarded themselves as messiah. People in our world today mostly do not think like that, but Jesus was a first century Jew and not a twentieth-century liberal. Anyone doing and saying what Jesus did and said must have faced the question? Will I be the one through whom the liberation will come? All of the evidence—not least the Temple-action and the title on the cross—suggests that Jesus answered, "Yes."

Second, Jesus' radical and counter-cultural agenda, subverting both the political status quo and the movements of violent revolution, was focused in his awareness, of vocation, John the Baptist re-enacted the Exodus in the wilderness; Jesus would do so in Jerusalem. Jesus' gospel message constantly invokes Isaiah 40-55, in which YHWH returns to Zion, defeats Babylon, and liberates Israel from her exile. At the heart of that great passage there stands a job description. Schweitzer argued a century ago that Jesus saw the Great Tribulation, the Messianic Woes, coming upon Israel and believed himself called, like the martyrs, to go ahead of Israel and take them upon himself. This would be the victory over evil; this would be the redefined messianic task. Jesus had warned that Israel's national ideology, focused then upon the revolutionary movements, would lead to ruthless Roman suppression; as Israel's representative he deliberately went to the place where that suppression found its symbolic focus. He drew his counter-Temple movement to a climax in Passover week, believing that as he went to his death Israel's God was doing for Israel (and hence for the world) what Israel as a whole could not do. Schweitzer divided the

“lives of Jesus” into those that had Jesus going to Jerusalem to work and those that had him going there to die. Schweitzer chose the latter. I think he was right.

Third, Jesus believed something else, I submit, that makes sense (albeit radical and shocking sense) within precisely that cultural, political, and theological setting of which I have been speaking. Jesus evoked, as the overtones of his own work, symbols that spoke of Israel’s God present with God’s people. He acted and spoke as if he were in some way a one-man, counter-Temple movement. He acted and spoke as if he were gathering and defining Israel at this eschatological moment—the job normally associated with Torah. He acted and spoke as the spokesperson of Wisdom. Temple, Torah, and Wisdom, however, were powerful symbols of central Jewish belief: that the transcendent creator and covenant God would dwell within Israel and order Israel’s life. Jesus used precisely those symbols as models for his own work. In particular, he not only told stories whose natural meaning was that YHWH was returning to Zion, but he acted—dramatically and symbolically—as if it were his vocation to embody that event in himself.

I suggest in short, that the Temple and YHWH’s return to Zion are the keys to gospel Christology. Forget the titles, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinking would-be orthodoxy. Focus instead, if you will, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer, and then embodying it by riding into the city in tears, by symbolizing the Temple’s destruction, and by celebrating the final Exodus. I propose, as a matter of history, that Jesus of Nazareth was conscious of vocation, a vocation given him by the one he knew as “Father,” to enact in himself what, in Israel’s scriptures, Israel’s God had promised to accomplish. He would be the pillar of cloud for the people of the new Exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God.

This bald, unsubstantiated summary of several lengthy historical arguments will not, perhaps, convince by itself. The main argument in its favor is double similarity and double dissimilarity with Jesus’ Jewish world and with the early church. The picture I have drawn is not obviously what the early church believed, but we can see how early Christian beliefs might have grown out of it. It is thoroughly credible within first-century Judaism while not being at all what most first-century Jews were thinking. It is not the featureless Jesus of modernist reconstruction. Then again, why should not Jesus have been just as much aware of symbol, story, theology, and vocation as the other figures whom we enthusiastically ascribe them?

Thus far, so much we may say of the history—which is, of course, completely theological, both in itself and in our reading of it. I turn, in conclusion, to three wider remarks, again about history and theology.

First, Schweitzer was right to see that his eschatological Jesus would shake comfortable Western orthodoxy to its foundations. I have modified his scheme by interpreting apocalyptic historically, but the Jesus that I discover remains shocking. Western orthodoxy has for too long had an overly lofty, detached, and oppressive view of God. It has approached Christology by assuming this view of God, and has tried to fit Jesus into it. Hardly surprisingly, the result has been a docetic Jesus; this in turn generated Reimarus’s protest, not least because of the social and cultural nonsense which the combination of deism and docetism reinforced. That combination remains powerful and still needs a powerful challenge. My proposal, then, is not that we assume that we know what the word “God” means, managing somehow to fit Jesus into that. Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately-risky—indeed, apparently crazy—vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple, dining once more with his friends, and dying on a Roman cross, and that we somehow allow our meaning for the word “God” to be re-centered around that point,

Second, the story of Jesus does not generate a set of theological propositions, a “New Testament Theology.” It generates, as Schweitzer saw with prophetic clarity, a set of tasks. The great exegetical mistake of the century (perpetrated by Schweitzer himself)—the idea that first-century Jews (including Jesus) expected the end of the world and were disappointed has so occupied the minds of scholars that the real problem of delay has gone almost unnoticed, and people now come upon it as though it were a novelty. If for Jesus, and indeed for the whole early church for which we have any real evidence, the God of Israel defeated evil once and for all on the cross, then why does evil still exist in the world? Was Jesus, after all, a failure? The New Testament answers this question with one voice. The cross and resurrection won the

victory over evil, but it is the task of the Spirit, and those led by the Spirit, to implement that victory in and for all the world. This task demands a freshly-drawn worldview: new praxis, stories, symbols, and answers. These come together into a fresh vision of God in which—precisely because of this re-discovery of who God is—history, theology, spirituality, and vocation recover their proper relationship. For Jesus' followers, finding out who Jesus was in his historical context meant and means discovering their own task within their own contents.

Third, and last. Several first-century Jews other than Jesus held and acted upon remarkable and subversive views. Why should Jesus be any more than one of the most remarkable of them? The answer must hinge upon the resurrection. If nothing happened to the body of Jesus, I cannot see why any of his implicit or explicit claims should be regarded as true. What is more, I cannot as a historian see why anyone would have continued to belong to his movement and regard him as its messiah. There were several other messianic or quasi-messianic movements within a hundred years on either side of Jesus. Routinely, they ended with the leader being killed by the authorities or by a rival group. If your messiah is killed, naturally you conclude that he was not the messiah. Some of those movements continued to exist; where they did, they took a new leader from the same family. (Note, however, that nobody ever said James, the brother of Jesus, was the messiah.) Such groups did not suffer from that blessed twentieth-century disease of cognitive dissonance. In particular, they did not go around saying that their messiah had been raised from the dead. I agree with Paula Fredriksen: the early Christians really did believe that Jesus had been raised bodily from the dead.¹⁰ What is more, I cannot make sense of the whole picture, historically or theologically, unless I say that they were right.

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1 See Charles H. Talbert, ed., *Reimarus: Fragments*, Ralph S. Fraser, trans. (London: SCM Press, 1971), 146-51. It provides two extracts from Hermann Samuel Reimarus's *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die verehrten Verehrer Gottes*. Reimarus (1694-1768) refrained from publishing the *Apologie* during his lifetime, but after his death these and other parts of it were published in 1774-78 by G. E. Lessing under the general title *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*.

2 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, W. Montgomery, trans. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1910, 1960), 330-403. Originally published as *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1906).

3 Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, J.C.G. Grieg, trans. (Cambridge, England: James Clarke, 1971). Originally published as *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

4 Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ*, Carl E. Braaten, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964). Originally published as *Der Sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Leipzig, Germany: A. Deichert, 1892).

5 See the seminal discussion in G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1980), 243-71, see further N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1992), 280-338.

6 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco Harper-Collins, 1995).

7 E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 237-41. See also C. H. Dodd, "Jesus as Teacher and Prophet," in *Mysterium Christi: Christological Studies by British and German*

Theologians, G. K. A. Bell and Gustav Adolph Deissmann, eds. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1930), 53-66; Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, James C.G. Grieg, trans. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 33-83.

8 Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, 284-6

9 Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, 122-39.

10 Paula Fredrikson, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 133.