
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

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Lifelines: The Historical Jesus

'Historical Jesus' studies are certainly back in vogue. After Albert Schweitzer 'blew the whistle' on the whole enterprise in 1906, any attempt to find and describe the Jesus of history was effectively abandoned until Käsemann's launch of the New Quest in 1953 (giving rise to the contributions of such scholars as Bornkamm and Perrin). In the last fifteen years there has been a spate of activity. This has been encouraged by such things as the eventual publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, by continued discussion of the value of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and by various archaeological finds in the Holy Land (for example, the excavations at Antipas' Sepphoris close to Nazareth, the first-century 'Jesus-boat' from Lake Galilee, and the many first-century tombs now excavated around Jerusalem). All these provide important data with which the historian has to work in building up a picture of Jesus in his original setting.

Evangelical Christians obviously have a vested interest in this task. Although we sometimes have a preference to concentrate on the risen Jesus of experience, the doctrine of the incarnation affirms that history is important. If we lose contact with the Jesus of history in a docetic fashion, we are losing what God has given us and are in danger of creating a Jesus in our own image. 'Historical Jesus' work therefore is important. Just because we do not like the reconstructions of others who set about the task with different presuppositions, that does not negate our responsibility to think about Jesus not just theologically but historically.

Much of this work is being done in North America and may be less familiar to a British audience. So this 'lifeline' will try to cover most of the works written in this field, concentrating on some of the leading writers in North America. A sequel in a forthcoming issue of *Anvil* will then assess the contribution of the principal British voice in the field, Tom Wright. What are historians saying these days about Jesus of Nazareth?

Overall snapshots

There are not surprisingly a range of 'Jesus-portraits' currently on offer. Some of the broad categories that we will see being used by authors in a variety of combinations include:

The wandering philosopher: This is the view of Burton Mack, who takes a far more sceptical view of Mark's Gospel than most critics, seeing it as almost entirely fictional.[1] A far less sceptical version of this appears in the work of Gerald Downing

1 *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1988.

(a Church of England vicar, now retired) who argues for strong similarities between Jesus and Cynic philosophers – those people such as Diogenes of Sinope (400-325BC) who spoke out as friends of freedom, helping people amongst the lower classes to strike out against social conventions.[2]

The sage: Ben Witherington III (an evangelical professor at Asbury) sees Jesus as a sapiential figure, bringing to life Israel's Wisdom traditions.[3] He may well have seen himself as embodying the personification of Wisdom (*Sophia*). This latter idea is understood by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza[4] as showing that Jesus saw himself as the embodiment of the female principle of God.

The social prophet: For Richard Horsley, Jesus was one who spoke out against urban elites and urged a social revolution which focused exclusively on peace and justice in the here and now.[5]

The charismatic Jew: For Geza Vermes Jesus was one of several charismatic Jewish holy men (*Hasidim*) who had miraculous powers.[6]

The eschatological prophet: Following on the work of Ben Meyer,[7] many in what has been term the 'Third Quest' see the most helpful framework as Jewish eschatology. Jesus came as a prophet to announce a new era within God's purposes towards Israel.

Already one can sense that there are major alternatives. Key choices may need to be made. Is Jesus to be set against an exclusively Jewish background or against a more diffuse Hellenistic culture? Did Jesus live in a culture concerned with social reform or with the distinctly Jewish issues of eschatology and fulfilment? And if he is placed firmly within Judaism, does his teaching emphasize more the themes of Wisdom or the Spirit? In addition, there are, of course, the methodological questions: how do we evaluate the relative merits of the testimony of the Synoptics, John, Q and *Thomas*? What are the right criteria for establishing authenticity?

Five major contributions from North America

We turn now to consider five major contributors in this field North America. As we do so, we will notice that the first two play down the Jewishness of Jesus, and the last two see it as vital. Marcus Borg in the middle acts a kind of 'bridge', noting the Jewishness of Jesus but denying his interest in eschatology.

First, the **Jesus Seminar**. This has certainly made the headlines. It is a society of around 80 scholars who since 1985 have been voting on the authenticity of every saying attributed to Jesus with a four colour system: red (authentic) though pink and grey to black (inauthentic). In *The Five Gospels* (1993) 18% of the sayings were

2 *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1988.

3 *Jesus the Sage: the Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1994.

4 *In Memory of Her: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad, New York 1987.

5 *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1973.

6 *Jesus the Jew: a Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, Collins, London 1973.

7 *The Aims of Jesus*, SCM, London 1979.

seen as clearly authentic; when they went on to discuss Jesus' actions in *The Acts of Jesus* (1998) this figure dropped to 16%.

The result is certainly a depleted Jesus: no Messianic claims, no talk of judgement, the end of the world or things after his death, and of course no virgin birth and no resuscitation of Jesus' corpse. Jesus was not into eschatology but was a social critic celebrating God's kingdom in shocking ways, who spoke little about God, himself, or the future and who disclaimed having any answer himself to these questions. It has often been noted that, if pursued relentlessly, certain criteria for establishing authenticity will inevitably produce a Jesus who is non-Jewish and non-Christian. Here he is.

For Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, the results confirmed the demise of Christianity as an institutional, creedal religion; Christian faith must now be re-symbolized as a secularized spirituality, promoting not faith *in* Jesus but the faith *of* Jesus. Of course, such 'results' *from* the seminar begin to sound more like the motivation *for* the seminar. In other words, the seminar members found what they were looking for. So critics of the Jesus Seminar have rightly questioned its motivation. Yet the strongest critiques can be made of its methods: for example, its overuse of the criterion of dissimilarity, its bias in favour of Q and *Thomas*, and its working assumption that in 'oral' cultures only short, pithy sayings will be remembered properly. The Seminar's claim to scholarly objectivity too is not borne out. 'They have simply viewed a list of sayings in the light of a particular view of Jesus to determine the extent to which this view is sustainable.'[8] Moreover, major errors can occur when scholars subtly shift from saying that something is historically unverifiable to saying that it is therefore unauthentic. At this distance in time some might even think that 18% is not all that bad for historically *verified* material when scrutinized under such critical conditions.

The second contribution to note is that of **Dominic Crossan**, the other chairman of the Jesus Seminar, who has produced major works on the historical Jesus in his own right: *The Historical Jesus* (1991) and *The Birth of Christianity* (1998). Crossan argues that 'Q', most of *Thomas* and a *Cross Gospel* (culled from the passion section of the *Gospel of Peter*) belong to the earliest stratum of tradition (AD 30-60), but that Luke, for example, dates to after 120 AD.

His Jesus again is not distinctively Jewish, but rather a social prophet who taught that people could have an unmediated access to both God and one another. He sought thereby radically to re-structure peasant society, removing hierarchy patronage and 'brokers'. Jesus demonstrated this 'brokerless kingdom' supremely by two things: meals and 'magic'. His table fellowship (what Crossan calls 'open commensality') demonstrated his blatant ignoring of all social distinctions. His miracles showed the proximity of God and his provision for people. Crossan uses the term 'magic' (drawing upon the work of Morton Smith in *Jesus the Magician* [1978]), because he sees 'magic' as the proper term used for miracles that are performed by the *wrong sort of people*. Jesus was able to heal people, he argues,

8 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London 1996, p 33.

only of their 'illness' (the social meaning associated with the condition), not of the 'disease' itself. Lepers remained lepers but were reintroduced into society.

Crossan argues that before the canonical gospels were written Christians had scoured the OT prophecies and this had then been woven into a supposedly historical narrative; so the passion narratives are not history remembered but prophecy historicized. The Resurrection narratives are fictional mythology designed to give closure to the story. Jesus' body was not raised; worse still, it was never properly buried but given to the dogs. By Easter morning no one knew where Jesus' body was; but they did know about the dogs.

Few have been persuaded of Crossan's dating of the sources. The majority see the Passion narratives as a unit of tradition formed very early whilst the apocryphal material, on which Crossan relies so heavily, is much later. And we might ask numerous other questions. Should Jesus' miracles really be reinterpreted as 'magic'? Was Jesus really a Cynic, or even comparable to them? Crossan's Jesus comes across as a quaint figure from the Hellenistic world – would he ever have caused any controversy with Jews *qua* Jews or provoked a reaction in Jewish Jerusalem? Was Jesus really only interested in 'this-worldly' realities with no eschatological interest or focus? And how come this Jesus, who eschewed concepts such as Messiah and mediation, so quickly come to be worshipped by his followers as the one through whose death we could now approach God? All 'historical Jesus' scholars have to wrestle with this, making their Jesus 'coherent' with the wider story of the apostolic aftermath, but in Crossan's case a chasm has emerged, which begins to defy historical explanation.

Our third contributor, **Marcus Borg**, is also associated with the Jesus Seminar.[9] His books include In his autobiography, he tells of his Christian upbringing, his subsequent critical reaction to it, and then his regained awareness (through various mystical and ecstatic experiences) of the reality of the spiritual. 'It became obvious to me that God – the sacred, the holy the numinous – was "real".'[10]

He accepts more 'mainstream' views of Gospel studies (the priority of Mark, caution in using John, the probable lateness of *Thomas*) but moves beyond those questions to build up instead a picture of the 'kind of person' Jesus was. Convinced as he is of the reality of the 'spirit-realm', Borg argues that Jesus was a '*spirit person*'. Just as in other cultures there are healers, shamans and mystics, Jesus was open to the spirit.

This then undergirds four further aspects of his mission, some of which overlap with the emphases of Horsley, Witherington, Fiorenza and Crossan (above). Jesus was a *healer* (miracles are recognized in other cultures and are genuine invasions of otherworldly power). He was a *sage*; a more helpful parallel than the Cynics might be the Buddha, but Jesus was clearly thoroughly Jewish in the way he articulated his vision of a God of compassion. Jesus was a *movement initiator*, calling his twelve

9 Borg's books include *Jesus – a New Vision*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1987, and the dialogue with Tom Wright published as *The Meaning of Jesus – Two Visions*, Harper Collins, San Francisco 1999.

10 *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: the Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco 1994, p 15.

disciples to show Israel a new inclusiveness, not defined by separation and the 'politics of holiness'. Finally Jesus was a *social prophet*, who spoke out against the urban elites and the domination system in Jerusalem.

For Borg the story of the historical Jesus strictly comes to an end with the crucifixion; his corpse was never resuscitated. But Christians do not believe in a resuscitation but rather in the *Resurrection*. This alternative concept does not require an empty tomb. Rather the living risen Christ can be a living and experiential *spiritual reality*. We must therefore distinguish sharply between the pre-Easter Jesus (who Jesus really was) and the post-Easter Jesus (what Jesus became in the faith of the disciples). But, in contrast to many who make this distinction, Borg wants to argue this post-Easter Jesus is *no less spiritually real* than the other.

Orthodox Christians would probably wish to question these last points most strongly. By contrast, Borg's five-fold portrait of Jesus pours new light on many aspects of Jesus' life and is in many ways quite refreshing (though is he is not unnecessarily playing off 'holiness' against 'compassion'?). But does it go as far as the evidence suggests? Borg denies to Jesus any Messianic claims, any sense of atoning significance to his death and any demand by Jesus that we should believe in him. But if Borg's Jesus is placed, as it is, back in the world of Judaism, then perhaps some of these ideas become not only possible but likely. There were, after all, numerous Messianic claimants in the years before and after Jesus. And if Jesus called God 'Abba', as Borg himself believes, what might that say about Jesus' identity and our need to respond to him?

Borg's 'spiritual' approach can seem appealing, especially in parts of the Church which emphasize the Spirit, but underneath there lurks a fundamentally different view of 'god'. Borg describes his view as a non-transcendental panentheism, the belief that everything participates in the divine. This allows him to affirm the reality of the spiritual realm, the power of the spirit and the reality of the living Christ, whilst all the time denying the *transcendent* existence of God. There are clear parallels with New Age thought. A more 'orthodox' perspective would be that God is transcendent but that he has power to work in all things. So one begins to wonder with Borg's work: Is his god the God of Israel? Is his spirit the Spirit of the Living God? Is Borg's Jesus sufficiently Jewish?

With our next scholars we turn the corner. From now on Jesus will be set fairly and squarely in a Jewish context. **Ed Sanders** argues that Christians have for too long caricatured first-century Judaism as a religion of 'works-righteousness'; obedience was not seen as *earning* God's grace, but as a means of *maintaining* one's position in the covenant of grace. In his books on Jesus, he warns that insisting on this caricature of Judaism can lead to a false caricature of Jesus himself. Jesus must not be set over against Judaism (for example, as a preacher of grace) but seen as working within Judaism.[11]

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11 *Jesus and Judaism*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1985; *the Historical Figure of Jesus*, Penguin, London 1993.

First-century Jews lived with a worldview coloured by 'restoration eschatology', the hope that their gracious God of covenant would bring in his long-awaited kingdom, restoring the fortunes of Israel; this would inaugurate the 'age to come' and so be, in one important sense, at the *eschaton* (the '*end* of time') – though the space-time universe would, of course, continue. Jesus' ministry must be set in this context, says Sanders. He was an eschatological prophet proclaiming the imminent restoration of Israel. This then explains various things: the parallels between Jesus and John the Baptist, his prophetic proclamation of the kingdom in word and deed, his appointment of twelve disciples (pointing to the 'restoration of the 'lost tribes' of Israel), and his prophetic action in the Temple symbolizing the destruction prior to the arrival of a new, 'restored' Temple.

Sanders is far more positive towards the Synoptic tradition than the scholars examined above. But he still dismisses the historicity of several 'traditional' features: Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, his insistence on repentance, and his opposition to Jewish laws about Sabbath, food and purity. Jesus would have been 'weird' if he had intended his death and probably hoped that God's kingdom would intervene to prevent it happening – hence his sense of being 'forsaken' by God on the cross. As for the Resurrection, the disciples did indeed have 'resurrection experiences' but what reality underlay those experiences is unclear.

This comes close to Schweitzer's portrait of Jesus as a mistaken eschatological prophet. It helpfully establishes an overall picture of Jesus without endless debates about authenticity, but is criticized (by people in the Jesus Seminar, naturally) as being too Jewish. Witherington and Wright, however, strongly defend Sanders at this point. Yes, there is a danger that Sanders so identifies Jesus within and *with* Judaism that we lose anything distinctive about him. Yet the general emphasis on Jewish restoration eschatology seems sound and illuminating. Even so, according to the Synoptics, Jesus' kingdom was not just future but present – in other words, the 'restoration' was taking place successfully during Jesus' ministry and Jerusalem-actions. And, as Wright argues, it is strange that Sanders minimizes the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees when Sander's own presentation of Jesus might easily explain Jesus' novel 'eschatological' approach to the issues over which they disagreed.

Perhaps, then, the first-century evidence is being misread through the desire to minimize the historic differences between Judaism and Christianity. In contrast to the scholars above Sanders has produced a Jesus who is credibly Jewish, but his Jesus is not credibly 'Christian' – in the sense of being able to explain what happened next and the rise of Christianity. Sanders' attitude to the crucifixion and Resurrection obviously compound this difficulty. This comes near to the hub of the issue: can we portray a Jesus who is credibly Jewish, who works clearly within the mind-set of Palestinian Judaism, and yet who is distinctive and provocative enough not only himself to be crucified but also to give birth to a distinctive faith focused on him?

This issue can be sensed in the title of the books being produced by scholar number five: **John Meier**. Two of at least three volumes have now appeared under

the overall title *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus.*[12] The title is a riddle, highlighting that though he was authentically Jewish, Jesus certainly was not typical. He cut his own line (for example, as an itinerant celibate) and was eventually rejected by the Jewish leaders because he was 'marginal', lacking any power-base in the capital.

Meier is known as the 'dogged digger' who pursues a relentless quest to establish the authenticity of each saying and event in Jesus' life. Unlike the Jesus Seminar he is a 'one man band', but he offsets this by setting up in each instance an imaginary 'unpapal conclave' in the library of Harvard Divinity School (consisting of a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew and an agnostic) who must pronounce on the historicity of every last logion and episode. This is historical criticism at its best (or worst?)!

Meier's unfinished project is so far quite traditional. Like Sanders he is dismissive of apocryphal documents, but gives greater weight than Sanders and others to John's Gospel. He affirms with Sanders that Jesus' primary concern was restoration eschatology, not social reform. But he argues that Jesus preached a kingdom that was *both* future (unlike Borg and the Jesus Seminar) *and* present (unlike Sanders). There are two further ways in which he differs from Sanders: first, he argues that Jesus *did* rescind various parts of the Law; secondly, he questions the authenticity of the Gospel statements about the timetable for the appearance of the Son of Man (Mark 9:1, 13:30 etc), which for Sanders had been clearly *authentic* texts showing that Jesus was mistaken. Meier is generally affirmative, however, of the accounts of Jesus' miracles (including those in John), noting that we have both sayings *and* episodes that attest Jesus' being credited with miracles in his lifetime.

Meier believes in the virgin birth and the resurrection but he draws an explicit distinction between this real Jesus (Jesus as he believes he actually was in history) and the 'historical Jesus' (which is the necessarily reductionist Jesus reconstructed by historians using the 'scientific' tools of historical research to establish what is securely verifiable). Another way of stating this vital distinction would be to talk of the *Jesus of the historians* who, because of the limits of the historical craft will almost certainly not be the same as the *real Jesus of history.* What we can confidently reconstruct at this distance cannot be identified with 'the real thing'.

Meier cannot be faulted for thoroughness, and his conclusions will be appealing to many. He seems to accept the methodology of the Jesus Seminar but comes to quite different conclusions – not least because of a different evaluation of the sources (positive on John, negative on apocryphal works). But his critics might argue that these evaluations may well already result from a prior 'working assumption' about Jesus (in this case one amenable to Catholicism?). But this charge (as noted above) could equally well be brought against the Jesus Seminar too.

It seems then that all scholars approach the questions of sources and authenticity with prior hypotheses about Jesus which their study then seeks to

12 Vol 1 *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Doubleday, New York 1991; Vol 2 *Mentor, Message and Miracles*, Doubleday, New York 1994.

endorse. Circularity of argument seems to be endemic and any claim to 'objectivity' ultimately unattainable or even spurious. Valuable as Meier's detailed work is, it may only confirm the limits of this 'building-block' approach to history and the myth of objectivity. What we need is a different approach to history and one that is open from the outset as to the hypotheses that it is seeking to test and substantiate.

It is in this respect that the alternative historical approach of Tom Wright proves so valuable. Rather than seeking to establish the authenticity of every saying before daring to speak of Jesus, he argues that all good history has always proceeded by an open methodology of 'hypothesis and verification'. Let us find a historically credible hypothesis which does the most justice to the literary and historical data. We shall assess the results of this in a forthcoming issue of *Anvil*.

Five Key books

J. D. Crossan	*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1991.
N. T. Wright	*Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London 1996.
	The Challenge of Jesus, SPCK, London 2000.
M. Borg & N.T. Wright	*The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, Harper Collins, San Francisco 1999.
M. A. Powell	*Jesus as a Figure in History*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky 1998. Re-published as *The Jesus Debate*, Lion, Oxford 1999.

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