

What are They Saying about the Historical Jesus?

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INTRODUCTION

These are exciting times for those who have learned interest in the Jesus of history. The publication of a significant number of Dead Sea Scrolls just over a decade ago, the publication in the last two decades or so of a host of related writings from or just before the New Testament period, and ongoing archaeological work in Israel, especially in and around Jerusalem and in Galilee, have called into question old conclusions and assumptions and opened the doors to new lines of investigation. It is not surprising that several academic and semi-academic books, published by leading presses, have enjoyed unprecedented sales and attention. Even major network television has produced documentaries and news programs, some of whom were viewed by record-setting audiences.

A major factor in much of the new interest in Jesus has been the controversy generated by the Jesus Seminar, based in California and led by maverick New Testament scholar Robert Funk. Although it cannot be said that all of the views of Funk and his Seminar are accepted by mainstream scholarship, their provocative conclusions and success at grabbing headlines have caught the attention of the general public to a degree I suspect not many twenty years ago would have thought possible.

Of course, scholars and popular writers have been publishing books on Jesus, in great numbers, for centuries. The difference is that now scholars are writing for the general public and the popular authors—at least some of them—are reading the scholars—at least selectively. Dan Brown's acclaimed and excoriated *The Da Vinci Code* is a recent and

very notable example. The background for Brown's exciting tale of murder and mystery is informed by scholarly and not-so-scholarly theories of Gospel sources. Although his story is fiction, Brown believes that he has based his story on scholarly "facts." These include the antiquity and reliability of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the existence of ancient Gospel materials among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other legends about Jesus, the disciples, and Mary Magdalene. It is Brown's description of these hypotheses as fact that lies behind the remarkable response, including more than ten books that have appeared in the last year or so that challenge and try to refute it. Some of Brown's facts are at best dubious and some are demonstrably mistaken.

My purpose tonight is to lay before you what I believe are key facets in the scholarly discussion of the historical Jesus. In my view there are five important areas of investigation and in all five there has been significant progress in recent years. I shall frame these areas as questions. They include (1) the question of the ethnic, religious, and social location of Jesus; (2) the question of the aims and mission of Jesus; (3) the question of Jesus' self-understanding; (4) the question of Jesus' death; and (5) the question of Jesus' resurrection. All of these questions directly bear on the relevance of Jesus for Christian faith and some of them have important implications for Jewish-Christian relations.

THE QUESTION OF ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS, AND SOCIAL LOCATION

Although it would be claiming too much to say that the fact and relevance of Jesus' Jewish heritage were rarely taken into consideration by Christian scholars and theologians, it would not be too far off the mark. One of the great blemishes of much of twentieth-century scholarship allegedly concerned with the historical Jesus was the

surprising lack of interest in the Jewish world in which he grew up and in which he conducted himself as an adult. Perhaps even worse, when the Jewish world of Jesus was taken into account, all too often it was presented in a distorted, jaundiced way.

It is not surprising that it has been Jewish scholars themselves who have tried to correct this neglect and distortion. Perhaps the most impressive effort came from Joseph Klausner (1874–1958), whose work appeared in Hebrew in 1922 and then in English translation in 1925.¹ Although lacking some of the critical perspective widely accepted and expected today, Klausner’s book is a masterpiece, marked by learning and fairness. His survey of the primary sources and his review of the scholarship of the previous century are still of great value. Of particular usefulness is his critical survey of Jewish scholarship, from Joseph Salvador (1796–1873)² to Claude Montefiore (1858–1938).³ Klausner calls our attention to Abraham Geiger’s “Judaism and its History in Twelve

¹ J. Klausner, *Yeshu ha-Notzri* (2 vols., Jerusalem: Stybel, 1922); ET: *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1925; 3rd ed., 1952).

² J. Salvador, *Jésus Christ et sa doctrine: histoire de la naissance de l’église, de son organisation et de ses progrès pendant le premier siècle* (2 vols., Paris: A. Guyot et Scribe, 1838; 2nd ed., Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1864–65); GT: *Das Leben Jesu und sein Lehre: die Geschichte der Entstehung der christlichen Kirche, ihrer Organisation und Fortschritte während des ersten Jahrhunderts* (Dresden: Walther’s Buchhandlung, 1841). Klausner (*Jesus*, 106-9) rightly complains that Albert Schweitzer, in his widely read and influential *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, gives Salvador short shrift, misspelling his name (viz. Salvator) and summarizing his work in a misleading and erroneous manner. Klausner wonders if an explanation lies in Schweitzer’s deficiency in French. Perhaps, but as already noted here, a German translation of Salvador’s important work was in fact available. For Schweitzer’s brief discussion of Salvador, see *Von Reimarus zum Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1906) 161 n. 1; ET: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 162-63 n. 2. The first ET appeared in 1910. Schweitzer locates his brief mention of Salvador’s work in a chapter titled “Further Imaginative Lives of Jesus.”

³ C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels: Edited with an Introduction and a Commentary* (with a series of additional notes by I. Abrahams; 3 vols., London: Macmillan, 1909; 2nd ed., 2 vols., 1927; repr. New York: Ktav, 1968). Among many other books, this prolific scholar also published *Some Elements of the Religious Teaching of Jesus* (The Jowett Lectures for 1910; London: Macmillan, 1910) and *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (London: Macmillan, 1930). Montefiore believes that much of Jesus’ teaching represents the best of Jewish religious teaching. Not all Jewish scholars agreed with this assessment. See G. Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (London and New York: Bloch, 1911; repr. New York: Ktav, 1969).

Lectures,” which devotes three lectures to Jesus and his disciples.⁴ Far from minimizing the Judaic character of Jesus and his teaching, Geiger (1810–74) goes so far as to describe Jesus as “a Jew, a Pharisaic Jew of Galilean type, one who looked forward to the hopes held at the time and who believed that those hopes would be fulfilled in himself. He propounded nothing whatever that was new, nor did he transcend the national limitations.”⁵ Geiger’s first sentence, with prescience and succinctness, adumbrates the findings of modern scholarship. His second sentence, however, is not only highly questionable, but stems from polemic and apologetic.⁶ Nevertheless, for all of its shortcomings, Geiger’s work rightly situates Jesus in his Jewish setting and recognizes the Judaic character of his teaching and activities.

Building on the work of Salvador, Geiger, Montefiore, and others, and moving beyond this early work with remarkable sophistication, Klausner himself concludes that “Jesus was convinced of his messiahship; of this there is no doubt; were it not so he would have been nothing more than a deceiver and imposter—and such men do not make history.”⁷ In my opinion, this sensible conclusion has been vindicated.

Klausner’s brilliant contribution unfortunately had little impact in Europe, which at that time was influenced by a new surge in historical skepticism, resulting from form criticism, and by varying degrees of anti-Semitism, which discouraged serious and positive investigation into the Judaic character and setting of Jesus. Indeed, the so-called New Quest of the historical Jesus, which erupted among the students of Rudolf Bultmann

⁴ A. Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte in zwölf Vorlesung* (3 vols., Breslau: Schletter, 1864; 2nd ed., 3 vols. in one; Breslau: Skutsch, 1865) 108-48.

⁵ Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte in zwölf Vorlesung*, 117, as quoted in English by Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 115.

in the 1950s, was hardly an improvement in the situation. Bultmann and his pupils clung to the curious notion that what was authentic in the Jesus tradition could only be material that was dissimilar to first-century Judaism. Such a method—known as the criterion of dissimilarity—could hardly accommodate a portrait of Jesus that takes into account his Jewish context and the Jewish dimensions of his teaching and activities. Fortunately, this dubious criterion has received the trenchant criticism it deserves. Almost no one today is guided by it.

During the decades in which the German New Quest got under way, lost momentum, and finally foundered, Jewish scholars rediscovered Jesus. In 1954 Hans-Joachim Schoeps (1909–1980) published his account of the life of Jesus.⁸ Schoeps had prepared for this work by undertaking several years of critical study, comparing aspects of Judaism and Christianity.⁹ In 1964 Asher Finkel (1935–) compared the teaching content and style of Jesus to those of his Jewish contemporaries, finding many parallels.¹⁰ In 1967 Schalom Ben-Chorin (1913–1999) published his *Bruder Jesus*, a second edition of which appeared in 1978 and an English translation, *Brother Jesus*, in 2001.¹¹ In 1968 David Flusser (1917–2000) published his *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, which

⁶ Klausner (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 115 n. 49) notes further that Geiger, in *Jüdische Zeitschrift* 10 (1872) 156, asserts that “when all was said and done Jesus did nothing at all.” Klausner rightly rejects this judgment.

⁷ Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 342.

⁸ H.-J. Schoeps, *Das Leben Jesu: Versuch einer historischen Darstellung* (Frankfurt: Eremiten, 1954).

⁹ H.-J. Schoeps, *Jüdisch-christliches Religionsgespräch in 19. Jahrhunderten; Geschichte einer theologischen Auseinandersetzung* (Berlin: Vortrupp, 1937); ET: *The Jewish-Christian Argument: A History of Theologies in Conflict* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

¹⁰ A. Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (AGSJU 4; Leiden: Brill, 1964; repr., with corrections, 1974).

¹¹ S. Ben-Chorin, *Bruder Jesus: Der Nazarener in jüdischer Sicht* (Munich: List, 1967; 2nd ed. 1978); ET: *Brother Jesus: The Nazarene through Jewish Eyes* (Athens : University of Georgia Press, 2001).

subsequently appeared in revised editions and in English translation.¹² All of these books attempt to show how fully Jewish Jesus was and in doing this they fly in the face of dominant forces in Christian—largely German—scholarship during this period. Although not always taken seriously at the time of their publication, as it turns out, these works adumbrated things to come.

Perhaps the most influential Jewish scholar to turn his attention to the historical Jesus has been Geza Vermes (1924–). Vermes' trilogy of works, beginning in 1973 with *Jesus the Jew*, has influenced a generation of scholars and has placed Jesus in a Jewish setting once and for all.¹³ The full Jewish identity of Jesus is now recognized by Christian scholars as essential, as seen in the influential books by Ben Meyer (1979), Anthony Harvey (1982), E. P. Sanders (1985), and others.¹⁴ The Jewish contribution to the study of the historical Jesus has been formally analyzed by Donald Hagner in his 1984 assessment *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, a work which hopefully will someday be updated.¹⁵

The fruitful progress of the rediscovery of the Judaic character and setting of Jesus is now everywhere seen. But before I can move to the next topic, a brief digression is required. In view of the almost overwhelming drive toward contextualizing Jesus in a

¹² D. Flusser, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Rowohlt's monographien; Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968); ET: *Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969; 2nd ed., with R. S. Notley, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997; 3rd corrected and expanded edition with R. S. Notley, Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001).

¹³ G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1983; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); rev. and repr. as *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM Press; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹⁴ B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (AGJU 25; Leiden: Brill, 1995); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); C. A. Evans and B. D. Chilton, *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration* (AGJU 39; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

Judaic context, the more recent work of John Dominic Crossan stands out starkly. As many know, Crossan has argued for seeing Jesus as a Cynic—a Jewish Cynic to be sure—but a Cynic in the full sense of the term.¹⁶ The Cynic interpretation has been encouraged by Gerald Downing, who has assembled a great number of ostensible parallels between sayings of Jesus and sayings attributed to Cynics or philosophers and moralists who are thought to stand in the Cynic tradition.¹⁷ Impressed by these parallels, Dom Crossan and Burton Mack have suggested that Jesus and his earliest following are best understood in terms of Cynic idiom. Accordingly, Jesus is viewed as iconoclastic and counter-cultural, not affirming Israel's heritage and eschatological aspirations. For example, Mack remarks: "As remembered by the Jesus people, Jesus was much more like the Cynic-teacher than either a Christ-savior or a messiah with a program for the reformation of second-temple Jewish society and religion."¹⁸ Mack goes on to appeal to pre-Markan traditions and the *Gospel of Thomas* for support for a view that has struck most Gospel scholars and Jesus scholars as implausible.¹⁹

¹⁵ D. A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (with a foreword by G. Lindeskog; Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984).

¹⁶ J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

¹⁷ F. G. Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (JSOT Manuals 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); idem, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

¹⁸ B. L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 245. Only the early layer of Q, thinks Mack, was Cynic. For a similar view, see L. Vaage, "Q and Cynicism: On Comparison and Social Identity," in R. A. Piper (ed.), *The Gospel behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (NovTSup 75; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 199-229; idem, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers according to Q* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994).

¹⁹ For criticism of Mack's hypothesis, see C. A. Evans, "The Misplaced Jesus: Interpreting Jesus in a Judaic Context," in B. Chilton, C. A. Evans, and J. Neusner (eds.), *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament. New Research Examining the Historical Jesus in the Context of Judaism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002) 11-39. For criticism of the Cynic hypothesis, see D. E. Aune, "Jesus and Cynics in First-Century Palestine: Some Critical Considerations," in J. H. Charlesworth and L. L. Johns (eds.), *Hillel and Jesus: Comparisons of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 176-92.

Whereas Mack's focus is primarily upon Q, the non-Markan source that most Gospels scholars think was utilized by Matthew and Luke, Dom Crossan seeks to get behind the sources, to lay bare the authentic historical Jesus. This Jesus, he finds, was an itinerant peasant Jewish Cynic. Crossan explains:

The historical Jesus was, then, a *peasant Jewish Cynic*. His peasant village was close enough to a Greco-Roman city like Sepphoris that sight and knowledge of Cynicism are neither inexplicable nor unlikely. But his work was among the farms and villages of Lower Galilee. His strategy, implicitly for himself and explicitly for his followers, was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power. . . . Miracle and parable, healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another. He announced, in other words, the brokerless kingdom of God.²⁰

Crossan's historical Jesus has little interest in Scripture, either its teaching or its fulfillment. He seeks not the restoration of Israel, but the creation of commensality. In short, Jesus proclaims egalitarianism, not eschatology. In fairness to Crossan, whose conclusions have been vigorously challenged from many quarters,²¹ he is not advocating lifting Jesus out of his Jewish setting. Crossan is attempting to interpreting Jesus and the Galilee of his times in the broader context of the Greco-Roman world, where Hellenism flourished and in some places and in some times Cynicism attracted many followers. But the pressing question before us asks if there was in fact a Cynic presence in Galilee at this time, a presence that may have influenced Jesus and his followers? The evidence—both literary and archaeological—strongly suggests that there was not.

One of the factors that encouraged Crossan and others to explore the Cynic hypothesis were the dramatic archaeological discoveries in Galilee in the 1970s and 80s. The

²⁰ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 421-22. The emphasis is Crossan's.

²¹ Not least N. T. Wright; see his *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

discovery of numerous Greek inscriptions (and a few Latin inscriptions as well), along with a network of roads (for example, linking Caesarea on the Mediterranean and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee) and major Greco-Roman style buildings and city layouts, led scholars to reassess the old, quaint notion of Galilee as a cultural and commercial backwater. The significance of the proximity of Sepphoris to Nazareth was immediately appreciated by scholars. It has become apparent that Jesus did not grow up place-bound, in a rustic, unsophisticated environment.

But in the excitement of assessing the implications of a Galilee now seen in a new light, in some circles there was a lack of recognition of just how Jewish much of Galilee was in the pre-70 period. Greco-Roman style urbanization and loyalty to the Torah were not mutually exclusive. The excavations of Sepphoris in the 1980s showed us how urban and wealthy the city of Sepphoris was, but the ongoing excavations of the 1990s and on into the twenty-first century have also shown us how Jewish the inhabitants of this city were.²²

The discovery of a number of *miqvaoth* (ritual immersion pools) and stone water pots (which resist ritual impurity; cf. John 2:6) points unmistakably to the Jewish presence. The absence of pork bones, pagan cultic buildings, and coin imprints and other icons offensive to Jewish sensibilities argue not only for a Jewish presence, but the near absence of a non-Jewish population. In short, the evidence thus far uncovered suggests that the people of Sepphoris were either Jewish or at least lived in a manner unobjectionable to Torah-observant Jews.

²² In the summarizing paragraphs that follow, I rely on M. A. Chancey and E. M. Meyers, "How Jewish Was Sepphoris in Jesus' Time?" *BAR* 26/4 (2000) 18-33, 61; M. A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee* (SNTSMS 118; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The upshot of these discoveries is that the intriguing hypothesis that Jesus was influenced by Cynic philosophers resident in Sepphoris is greatly weakened. It is not altogether ruled out, but its plausibility is seriously diminished. Moreover, recent excavations in Nazareth itself suggest that the assumption that Jesus and members of his family would in all probability (and perhaps of necessity) have worked in nearby Sepphoris is no longer so obvious. It appears that Nazareth had its own thriving economy—including building, if the evidence of the stone quarries tells us anything. The commercial and economic activities of Nazareth were more than adequate to keep the local residents fully occupied, with little need to seek out-of-town employment.

If we are agreed that the ethnic, social, and religious location of Jesus is firmly a Jewish one, what then can we say about his teachings and activities? To these questions we now turn.

THE QUESTION OF AIMS AND MISSION

The studies of E. P. Sanders and the late Ben Meyer, long-time colleagues at McMaster University, are among the very best of the attempts to reconsider the aims and mission of Jesus. Both scholars rightly see the hope of Israel's restoration underlying Jesus' teaching and activities.

In my view the place to begin is with John the Baptist, who is presented in the New Testament as the “forerunner” of Jesus the Messiah. Christian interpretation of the role of John is selective and apologetic, to be sure, but is very probably fair in its general placement of John in the restorative movements of the early first century and its linkage of John with Jesus. Linkage with Jesus is almost a critical certainty, given the improbability of having Jesus baptized by John “for the forgiveness of sins” (cf. Mark

1:4), when in fact he had not. According to Christian theology, Jesus is sinless, so why invent a story of having him baptized by John, who baptized repentant Israelites? Placing John in the context of restoration movements of this time is also probable. This makes the most sense of John's location at the Jordan River. Now, it is true that Josephus emphasizes the political reasons that Herod Antipas had for disposing of John, but there is no justification for viewing the various accounts of Josephus and the New Testament Gospels as irreconcilable. For obvious reasons, Josephus wishes to avoid the topic of messianism and Jewish national restoration. (After all, he is trying to preserve the favor he enjoys in Flavian Rome.) John's political embarrassment for Herod is all he wishes to relate. In contrast, the New Testament evangelists, who also relate John's imprisonment and death at the hand of Herod, emphasize John's eschatology. John called on Israel to repent and prepare for the coming day of the Lord. John's message and his sudden removal from the public scene created the perfect entry for Jesus.

But the linkage between John and Jesus is far more significant than this. John's oblique reference to "these stones," in the context of the Jordan River (cf. Matt 3:9 = Luke 3:8), almost certainly alludes to the twelve stones erected by Joshua on the occasion of Israel's crossing into the Promised Land (cf. Josh 4; Deut 27:4). As the "false" prophet Theudas twenty years later, who called the poor to join him at the Jordan, whose waters at his command would be parted (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.5.1 §97-98; cf. Acts 5:36), so John summons the poor of spirit to join him for baptism at the Jordan and be baptized. Jesus answers this call and shortly later appoints twelve disciples (cf. Mark 3:14), the significance of which almost certainly points to the restoration of Israel. This

appointment of twelve disciples is in all probability an extension of John's Jordan symbolism.²³

If I am correct here, then we have at hand an important clue in understanding the aims and mission of Jesus. His announcement of the presence of the kingdom (or rule) of God is an announcement of the restoration of Israel. The call to repent is intended not only to facilitate the fullness of God's rule, but also constitutes a warning of coming judgment. God will soon rule the earth, as he rules heaven, but his earthly rule will not co-exist with sin and disobedience. Israel must repent and following this repentance will be the long-awaited eschatological blessings.

The healings and exorcisms of Jesus must also be seen in this light. Defending himself, Jesus argues, "if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). The healings, especially the exorcisms, offer tangible evidence of the truth of Jesus' proclamation: The rule of God on earth really has begun. This is why when Jesus sends the twelve out to preach the rule of God, he authorizes them to heal and exorcise also (Mark 3:14-15; 6:7; Matt 10:1; Luke 9:1-2).

Now we turn to what implications this proclamation and these activities have for assessing Jesus' self-understanding. If we understand rightly what Jesus was actually saying and what he was trying to achieve, we shall probably understand him better.

²³ For further details, see C. A. Evans, "The Baptism of John in a Typological Context," in A. R. Cross and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies* (JSNTSup 234; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 45-71.

THE QUESTION OF JESUS' SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Jesus' best-known self-reference is the almost ubiquitous sobriquet "son of man." It appears abruptly in the Markan Gospel, without explicit definition and almost devoid of context. In the Gospels this sobriquet is linked to Daniel's vision of the coming son of man, who from God receives authority and kingdom (Dan 7:13-14). There are two important indications that this self-reference derives from Daniel 7. First and obvious, on a few occasions the sobriquet "son of man" is linked with words and phrases from Daniel 7. We hear of the son of man coming with the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:62), which alludes to Dan 7:13, and we hear of the son of man coming not be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45), which alludes to Dan 7:14. Secondly, and less obviously, Jesus says that as son of man he has authority *on earth* to forgive sins (Mark 2:10). At first reading, the qualifying phrase "on earth" seems otiose. Where else does the historical Jesus have authority? Where else does his ministry take place? The phrase "on earth," linked with the sobriquet "son of man," immediately takes the hearer back to Daniel 7, where the son of man, *in heaven*, receives from God authority.

From these passages and from others, it seems apparent that the son of man self-designation is not simply Aramaic idiom, a way of saying a "human," as opposed to an animal or an angel. Now it is true that the "son of man" is an Aramaic idiom (*bar enosh*) that is a way of referring to a human. But Jesus' habit of referring to the sobriquet with the definite article—*the* son of man—is meant to call to mind a particular son of man figure. The definite article does not suggest in itself a title, nor does it in itself suggest that the idiom is messianic. Jesus says "the son of man" (Greek: *ho huios tou anthropou*, lit. "the son of the man"), in order to allude to a specific figure, in a specific passage of

Scripture: that is, the son of man figure described in Daniel 7, the figure who is presented to God and from God receives kingdom and authority. Jesus has received this authority, and perhaps his vision at the time of his baptism is when he experienced this (Mark 1:10-11), and now preaches the rule of God and demonstrates its powerful presence by casting out Satan.

The authenticity of the self-reference “son of man” can hardly be doubted. This is widely held because of the observation that the early church did not in fact exploit this Aramaic idiom in its formulation of christology. The idiom simply made no sense in Greek or Latin. Early Christians, accordingly, preferred sobriquets like “son of God” or “savior” or “Messiah,” not “son of man.” Thus we observe the curious phenomenon of the early church suppressing what was in reality Jesus’ favorite designation, a designation that worked well in Aramaic-speaking, scripture-hearing Galilee, but worked poorly elsewhere.

As *the* “son of man,” invested by God with authority on earth to proclaim God’s rule, to forgive sin, and to make pronouncements relating to what can be done on the sabbath and what is clean, and the like, Jesus naturally thought of himself as a prophet, speaking forth the word of God. Again, the strongest evidence for this is seen in a passage that cannot be easily explained as a Christian invention: “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4). Because the saying is set in a context of rejection and ineffective ministry, it is almost certainly not the product of Christian apologetic or piety, but derives from Jesus himself. Evidently the public too thought of Jesus as a prophet (cf. Mark 8:27-28). We might note also that when Jesus is arrested and mocked, he is asked to prophesy (cf. Mark 14:65),

thus in all probability alluding to his reputation as prophet. In context, this insult does not advance or reflect Christian beliefs about Jesus. After all, Jesus is the Messiah and son of God, no mere prophet.

This brings us to the question of Jesus' messianic identity. It was not long ago that critical scholarship argued or assumed that early Christianity's confession of Jesus as Israel's Messiah was an understandable consequence of the excitement of the resurrection. If resurrected, then what else could Jesus be? Prophet and teacher no longer seemed adequate. Surely Jesus is the Messiah—so goes the argument. But this reasoning has fallen on hard times. After all, it is not so much the messianic identity of Jesus, *per se*, that Christians proclaimed; it was his divine status, his role as mediator between heaven and earth that was proclaimed throughout the Roman Empire. Greeks and Romans were not interested in a Jewish Messiah. But a divine Savior was a different matter.

The ubiquity of the title Messiah, or, in Greek idiom, Christ, is not easily explained as an Easter afterthought. It is far better to think that the universally held opinion following the resurrection that Jesus was the Messiah was due to what Jesus himself taught and encouraged his disciples to believe. There is, of course, specific evidence for this, as seen especially in Jesus' appeal to Isa 61:1-2 ("the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed to preach . . ."), explicitly in his Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16-30) and implicitly in his reply to the imprisoned and discouraged John the Baptist (Matt 11:2-5 = Luke 7:18-22). The messianic import of these allusions to words and phrases from Isaiah 61 and other Isaianic passages has now been dramatically clarified and confirmed by a fragmentary text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to 4Q521, when God's

Messiah appears, the sick will be healed, the dead will be raised, and the poor will have good news preached to them.

And finally, we must ask if Jesus anticipated his death, and if he did, what significance did he attach to his death. I shall be brief. In my opinion it is almost a certainty that Jesus anticipated his death, at least at some point in his ministry, either shortly before entering Jerusalem (as in the Synoptic Gospels), or perhaps shortly after entering Jerusalem that final Passover week. I conclude this way, not simply because the death of John the Baptist would have pressed itself on Jesus' thinking (cf. Mark 9:9-13), or because Jesus was a realist and had to have known that the ruling priests were set on destroying him. The clearest evidence that Jesus anticipated his death is seen in his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-40). The portrait of the frightened, grieving Jesus is hardly the stuff of pious imagination. One should compare the Johannine portrait of the composed, serene Jesus, who calmly discusses the glory that he and his heavenly Father share. No, the Synoptic portrait of the frightened Jesus who falls on his face and begs God to remove from him the cup of suffering (Mark 14:36) is surely the stuff of history.

If Jesus did indeed anticipate suffering and death, then I find it very likely that he sought to find meaning in it. After all, the deaths of the righteous, especially in the time of the Antiochid persecution and the Maccabean revolt, were understood to be of benefit to the nation of Israel. Why should Jesus think any less of his own death? I think it most probable that Jesus pondered the meaning of his death and sought to explain it to his frightened, discouraged disciples. Jesus saw in his death, in the shedding of his own blood, a Passover-like sacrifice that would benefit Israel. At the same time Jesus

remained confident that God would raise him up and that someday he would drink the Passover cup in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25).

The very words of institution appear to be a conflation of Old Testament texts that speak of the blood of sacrifice, covenant, and renewal (Exod 24:8; Jer 31:31; Zech 9:11): “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:25). The tradition is ancient (1 Cor 11:23-25) and thoroughly Jewish (cf. 1 Cor 5:7 “Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed”). To the very end Jesus remains as Jewish as ever. Even the meaning of his death is seen in very Jewish terms.

THE QUESTION OF JESUS’ DEATH

Mel Gibson’s recent movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, stirred up emotions, especially in Jewish circles. The fear that anti-Semitic feelings would be aroused is understandable, especially in light of long and unfortunate association of Passion plays and anti-Semitism reaching back to the Middle Ages. Not surprisingly, the popular press, spiked with scholarly and semi-scholarly input, raised the old question of who was responsible for the death of Jesus. This question may seem complicated and difficult to the laity, but it really is not.

Collaboration between local authorities and their Roman overlords was standard administrative procedure in the Roman Empire. In Judea in the time of Jesus’ ministry, this meant the collaboration between high priest Caiaphas and his priestly colleagues, on the one hand, and Pontius Pilate and his retainers, on the other. The evidence indicates that the Jewish high priest and the Roman governor were able to work together. Caiaphas was appointed to office about one year before Pilate took office and the latter allowed the former to remain as high priest the duration of his administration. Indeed, the

simultaneous removal, from office, of the high priest and the governor in early 37 suggests that they were implicated together in the violent Samaritan affair, an affair into which Caiaphas may well have dragged Pilate. In any event, the evidence that we have—and it is rich thanks to the New Testament evangelists and Josephus, all of whom wrote within one generation of Pilate’s administration—documents very helpfully how Jewish and Roman authorities worked together.

Indeed, the accounts of the destruction of various renewal movements—such as those led by Theudas and later by the anonymous Jew from Egypt—strongly suggest that Roman officials acted upon intelligence, along with biblical explanations, supplied them by their Jewish associates. The case of the arrest, examination, and release of Jesus, son of Ananias, in 62 is another important case in point. Like Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, son of Ananias, appealed to Jeremiah 7 in his prophecies of woe upon Jerusalem and the temple. Ruling priests threatened and intimidated this man and eventually had him arrested and handed over to the Roman governor, with demands that he be put to death (cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 6.5.3 §300-309). The governor questioned and scourged the hapless prophet of doom, but released him—over the protests of the Jewish authorities—as a harmless lunatic. The parallels between the experiences of these two Jesuses are quite significant, with the latter Jesus providing important corroboration of the Gospel story of the earlier Jesus.

Just as Jesus, son of Ananias, had two “trials”—one before the Jewish authorities and a second before the Roman governor—so too did Jesus of Nazareth undergo two trials. Of course, it might be too much to call his examination by the Jewish authorities a *trial*—perhaps “hearing” would be better. In any case, the high priest called part of the council

together and secured a consensus from them. Jesus' threats against the temple establishment, complete with offensive allusions to Jeremiah 7 (cf. Mark 11:15-18), and his bold claim to be the person described in Daniel 7, who some day will sit in judgment on his judges, moved the council to condemn him.

The final decision lay with the Roman governor. Pilate's hesitation to accede immediately to the ruling priests' call for execution, a hesitation that the evangelists understandably exploit to the fullest, had everything to do with political caution, not with a commitment to justice. Pilate knew full well the dangers of rabble rousers and no doubt appreciated the gravity of the charges brought against Jesus. But he also recognized the dangers of provoking the Jewish people at Passover time by publicly executing a popular teacher.

Some have argued that Pilate was violent, even bloodthirsty, and that the Gospels' portrait of a hesitating governing is apologetic fiction. I disagree. Pilate served as governor as long as he did because he did not act rashly and was not in fact prone to violence. The portrait of a violent Pilate comes from an uncritical reading of Josephus and, especially, of Philo. Both of these Jewish writers, themselves apologists, found it expedient to vilify Pilate, greatly exaggerating his faults. Even so, his clashes with his subjects were few. In fact, only in two instances was there bloodshed. If he took office in 19 or 20, instead of 25 or 26, as has been traditionally held, then his tenure ran some 17 or 18 years, making him the longest serving governor of Judea. By Roman standards, only two violent clashes (the last one involving the Samaritans and resulting in Pilate's recall) in that much time hardly constitute a bloody record.

Even the so-called Passover pardon is probably historical and not a piece of reckless, easily disproved fiction. What I find interesting is that Pilate's practice of extending a pardon at Passover very likely was sourced in Jewish tradition and was meant to show respect for Israel's greatest holiday.²⁴ When confronted with the dilemma of Jesus of Nazareth, the wily governor used his practice of clemency to shield himself from political fallout, if there be any, in the aftermath of Jesus' execution. After all, how can the Jewish people blame *him*, when he had in fact offered to release the popular preacher? Far from fiction, the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' appearances before Jewish and Roman authorities give every indication of being accurate and well informed.²⁵

Not only was the offer of a Passover pardon a concession to Jewish tradition and sensitivities, so was the governor's willingness to allow the bodies of the crucified men to be taken down, before sunset, and be buried decently, according to Jewish custom. There is no evidence—archaeological or literary—that bodies of the executed were left unburied in Israel, especially in and around Jerusalem, during peacetime. The skeleton of the crucified man, found near Jerusalem, whose right heel was transfixed by an iron spike, dated to the time of Pilate's administration, offers grim supporting evidence for the view that the governor did indeed allow the crucified to be properly buried and not left on the cross to rot or cast into a ditch, exposed to animals.

Furthermore, the Gospels' accounts of a member of the Jewish council seeing to burial arrangements is also in keeping with Jewish traditions, whereby certain tombs were set aside for this very purpose. To be sure, we see apologetical touches in the story, as Joseph of Arimathea, in the telling of the story, becomes increasingly supportive of Jesus

²⁴ In that Passover signified release from captivity.

and his mission. Nevertheless, the specificity of details and the coherence with Jewish customs argue for authenticity. Moreover, the story as told in the Gospels is not easily explained as fiction. Surely a fictional account would give prominence to some of Jesus' disciples, such as Peter. But the disciples of Jesus have fled; his body is left in the hands of the very authorities who condemned him.

THE QUESTION OF THE RESURRECTION

Whether or not its remarkable inscription is authentic, the James ossuary has generated a great deal of interest in Jewish burial traditions. Understanding these traditions sheds light on important aspects of the death and burial of Jesus, and on the Easter discovery as well.

Jewish burial traditions can potentially tell us much about the world of Jesus, and perhaps even clarify at one or two points his teaching and, even more significantly, clarify aspects of his death and burial. The discovery and analysis of hundreds of skeletons and skeletal remains have told us much about the health and longevity of the people. It gives us pause to discover that in a typical two or three generation burial crypt more than one half of the skeletons are of children. Indeed, in some cases two-thirds of the remains are of children. From data such as these, some historical anthropologists have speculated that as many as one fourth of the population in Jesus' time was ill, injured, and in need of medical help on any given day. This grim possibility gives new meaning to the Gospels' notice that crowds were attracted to Jesus, because he was known as a healer (e.g., Mark 3:10; 4:1; 5:27-28).

²⁵ A conclusion recently reached by B. C. McGing, "Pontius Pilate and the Sources," *CBQ* 53 (1991) 416-38.

The Jewish practice of ossilegium, that is, the reburial of the bones of the deceased,²⁶ may explain Jesus' cryptic remark to the would-be follower who requested that he first be allowed to "bury his father." Jesus replies: "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt 8:22 = Luke 9:60). It has been plausibly suggested that the man has requested delaying discipleship until he has reburied his father's bones. Jesus has not urged the man to ignore his dying father. Rather, Jesus urges him to allow the dead (i.e., the dead relatives in the family crypt) to see to the final burial of the man's dead father. Proclaiming the rule of God to the living takes precedence.²⁷

Jewish burial practices, including Jewish sensitivities regarding corpse impurity and the sacred duty to bury the dead, argue strongly against the novel theory proposed a decade ago that Jesus' corpse may well have been unburied, either left hanging on the cross or perhaps was thrown in a ditch, exposed to animals as carrion.²⁸ It has been pointed out that hundreds, if not thousands, of Jews who were crucified during war time or insurrection were left unburied. This is true, but Jesus was crucified during peace time. It is inconceivable that the bodies of Jesus and the other men would have been left unburied just outside the walls of Jerusalem, during Passover season. I repeat: the grim discovery in an ossuary of the remains of the crucified man, mentioned above, is graphic evidence that Pontius Pilate permitted the crucified to be buried and sometime later the bones to be gathered and placed in an ossuary in the family crypt—all according to Jewish burial customs.

²⁶ E. M. Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth* (BibOr 24; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1971); C. A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003).

²⁷ B. R. McCane, "'Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead': Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21-22," *HTR* 83 (1990) 31-43.

²⁸ As argued by J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

Jewish burial practice may also shed light on the reasons why the women returned to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning. Evidently their motivation was to perfume Jesus' body, so that the seven days of mourning could take place. Making note of which tomb contained Jesus' body (for he was in a tomb reserved for criminals—not in his family's tomb), they hoped eventually to gather the bones of Jesus and take them to his family tomb. Accordingly, the women took special interest in the tomb. Finding the body removed would, therefore, have occasioned great consternation.

The story told in the New Testament Gospels—in contrast to the greatly embellished versions found in the *Gospel of Peter* and other writings—smacks of verisimilitude. The women went to the tomb to mourn privately and to perform duties fully in step with Jewish burial customs. They expected to find the body of Jesus; ideas of resurrection were the last thing on their minds. The careful attention given the temporary tomb is exactly what we should expect. Pious fiction—like that seen in the *Gospel of Peter*—would emphasize other things. Archaeology can neither prove nor disprove the resurrection, but it can and has shed important light on the circumstances surrounding Jesus' death, burial, and missing corpse.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Research in the historical Jesus has taken several positive steps in recent years.

Archaeology, remarkable literary discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and progress in reassessing the social, economic, and political setting of first-century Palestine have been major factors. Notwithstanding the eccentricities and skepticism of the Jesus Seminar, the persistent trend in recent years is to see the Gospels as essentially reliable, especially when properly understood, and to view the historical Jesus in terms much

closer to Christianity's traditional understanding, i.e., as proclaimer of God's rule, as understanding himself as the Lord's anointed, and, indeed, as God's own son, destined to rule Israel. But this does not mean that the historical Jesus that has begun to emerge in recent years is simply a throwback to the traditional portrait. The picture of Jesus that has emerged is more finely nuanced, more obviously Jewish, and in some ways more unpredictable than ever.

The last word on the subject has not been written and probably never will be. Ongoing discovery and further investigation will likely force us to make further revisions as we read and read again the old Gospel stories and try to come to grips with the life of this remarkable Galilean Jew.