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WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET:
Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus

PAULA FREDRIKSEN

A century ago, scholarship on the historical Jesus had polarized around two distinct options. To the one side stood the ethical constructions of the liberal Protestants. Optimistic about the use of history in service of theology, endlessly producing studies of the life of Jesus to anchor their religious formulations, these scholars held that Jesus' basic message centered on preaching, in Harnack's famous formula, "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."

To the other side stood scholars less optimistic—indeed, pessimistic—about the Gospels' servicability as witnesses to Jesus. The erosion of scholarly confidence in the Gospels' historical adequacy can be plotted along a trajectory that passes from Lessing's publication of the Reimarus essays in the late eighteenth century to Weiss's book on Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the late nineteenth century. This trajectory terminated in the conclusion, summed up by Weiss and energetically extended by Schweitzer, that the kingdom Jesus preached was the kingdom anticipated by his first-century Jewish contemporaries: an apocalyptic event, centered on a new or renewed Jerusalem, inaugurated by the messiah, and established by God.

Where are we, a hundred years later? Jesus the charismatic healer and existential religious thinker, Jesus the wandering cynic sage, Jesus the social revolutionary, Jesus the prophet of the impending end of days—all of these versions of Jesus populate the pages of the most recent books, all presented with the same calm authority, all constructed through appeals to the same data. If this is progress, we might wish for less of it.

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Jerusalem, where Jesus pronounced the parable of the sheep and the goats. The parable is found in Matthew 25:31-46, and it is one of the most famous parables of Jesus. This parable is a call to love and mercy, and it is a warning against judging others.

Jesus' message was often communicated through parables. He used these parables to explain the kingdom of God. He used simple stories to make complex ideas understandable. He used parables to teach His followers about the nature of God and His kingdom. He used parables to challenge His listeners to think differently about the world around them.

Jesus' message was about love, mercy, and justice. He taught about the importance of caring for others and treating them with kindness. He taught about the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. He taught about the importance of living a life that is consistent with the teachings of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' message was also about the importance of preparing for the kingdom of God. He taught about the need for faith and trust in God. He taught about the importance of living a life that is aligned with the values of the kingdom of God.

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over, he was secretly arrested by a force sent out by the priestly authorities, brought before Pilate, and crucified for sedition.

Shortly thereafter, his followers, most of whom had fled at his arrest, proclaimed him to be raised from the dead. Eventually, other Jews such as Paul, who had not known Jesus, also had experiences of the risen Christ. (I've now moved from secondary evidence, the Gospels, to primary evidence, Paul's letters.) Jesus' followers regrouped, gave up the movement's Galilean roots, and settled in Jerusalem, continuing to preach about the kingdom and, also, about Jesus. Within very few years, this gospel spread to the diaspora, where the new communities began to absorb significant numbers of Gentiles. Gentiles were not required to convert to Judaism; yet these communities, whether mixed or exclusively Gentile, continued to place themselves within the traditions of Israel, to regard Jewish scripture as sacred, and to await the kingdom, increasingly identified with the return of Jesus, also spoken of as “Christ,” “Son,” and “Lord.”

This is a fairly uncontroversial gloss of the history of the early movement around Jesus. I shall now complicate the picture by bringing on the professionals. But first, a brief discourse on method.

The "quest for the historical Jesus" requires the reconstruction of his message and, to the degree that we can get at it, his motives and goals. This effort at reconstruction, in turn, requires getting a fix on Jesus' religious, social, and political context. The reconstructed context requires that we analyze the material presented in the Gospels before we can assess, historically and critically, their—and, in a sense, Jesus'—content. This effort at interpretation can land us, of course, in the proverbial hermeneutical circle. Hence the title of this essay.

But the situation is not hopeless. We are doing history, and while sometimes the method we use creates the data we then interpret, there are other fixed points by which we can measure whether we write, and read, good history or bad. A good historical hypothesis should account for data coherently, plausibly, and parsimoniously. As theories go, simple, public, and falsifiable should be preferred to complex, non-public (such as "subconscious" or "repressed"), and non-falsifiable. I shall lay this out as I go on. For Jesus and early Christianity, our data are these: He preached in the Galilee. He was executed by Rome in Jerusalem around Passover. His movement relocated itself in Jerusalem. It proclaimed that he had been raised from the dead. Within a very few years, it also embraced Gentiles.

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1 On the search for the subconscious beliefs of first-century Jews, see N.T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 245. For an example of repressed data and a non-falsifiable hypothesis, consider Dom Crossan's explanation for Jesus' (first and only) journey to Jerusalem at Passover in Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 135–136, "Was James a Pharisee? ... Did he come there [Jerusalem] only after the execution of Jesus, or had he been there long before it? ... Above all, was he in Jerusalem long before Jesus' death, and did his presence there invite, provoke, challenge Jesus' only journey to Jerusalem?" Crossan concedes that his proposal is "tentative" and "terribly hypothetical." I think it's desperate and will say more below.
The Acapaticc Jesus

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construed within the practices of first-century Judaism. Moneychanging and the sale of unblemished animals were necessary for the normal functioning of the Temple, whose principal role was to serve as the site for the offerings enjoined by God on Israel through Moses at Sinai. Sanders then set Jesus’ specific gesture—overturned tables—within the context of restoration eschatology, with its traditions that a new or renewed Temple would come at the end of days. So what did Jesus do? He symbolically enacted an apocalyptic prophecy. The present Temple, his action proclaimed, would soon be destroyed, to cede to the final temple, the temple of God’s coming kingdom.

Let’s leave this apocalyptic Jesus there, on the Temple Mount, and turn our attention to three of his ethical alternatives: Jesus the cynic, Jesus the Jewish cynic, and Jesus the anti-nationalist. As I review these, I will draw attention to the methodological commitments of their creators, to the picture of first-century Judaism their constructions require, to the meaning, consequently, given to the phrase “the kingdom of God,” and to their assessment, finally, of Sanders’ interpretation of the Temple incident.

**JESUS, THE CYNIC**

Jesus, according to Burton Mack and others, was a wandering Cynic. This reconstruction draws on archaeological data and a knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy. It privileges the sayings material (known as Q) over the narrative material in the Gospels—the opposite of Sanders’ approach—as the best way to get at Jesus’ intention and teaching. It looks to wisdom traditions within Judaism rather than, say, prophetic or apocalyptic ones, for a consonant context.

On the basis of archaeology, proponents of this model of Jesus as Cynic can argue that Galilee itself had considerable cities built in the Hellenistic style—Sepphoris, only a short walk from Nazareth, and Tiberias. “Lower Galilee was an urbanized region.” Ringed round with the Hellenistic cities from the Seleucid era, Galilee was itself “an epitome of Hellenistic culture.”

A different sort of archaeology is worked on the Q material. Analysed for redactional layers, Q is then separated into different strata, with different communities hypothesized as their social matrices. The earliest layer, according to this theory, is the wisdom or sapiential sayings (Q1). A second, apocalyptic layer represents a later stage of disappointed

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5Mack, *Mark*, p. 66.

6This approach is most associated with the work of John Kloppenburg; see now, most recently, Burton Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993).
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and then, not all of them...
Many of the interpretations fundamental to this reconstruction—archaeological data as testimony to a hellenized Galilee and the assignment of redactional levels and social worlds to Q—are, in fact, extremely controversial. I will note here simply that the Cynic hypothesis leaves a tremendous amount to accident, not least of all Jesus’ death. It allows no important connection between Jesus and his native religion and culture and none between him and the religion to which his movement eventually gave rise. This is minimalist history. And it requires much more elaborate theories to explain where all the rest of Christian tradition comes from.

**Jesus, the Wandering Jewish Cynic**

I turn now to a refined version of the same thesis: Jesus was a wandering Jewish Cynic. John Dominic Crossan introduced this figure in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant,* and presented him again, in more popular form and with further refinements, in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.* Unlike Mack and Seeley, Crossan takes seriously both the sayings material in Q and the narrative material in Mark. Thus, Jesus began his career after contact with John the Baptist, who was an apocalyptic prophet, and, for a while, Jesus himself might have been so convinced. But he became disillusioned with that message after John’s death. Then, “Jesus, finding his own voice, began to speak of God not as imminent apocalypse, but as present healing.” He took to the road, speaking witty aphorisms, eating with peasant strangers, performing miracles, exercising compassion, embodying through this medium a message of unbrokend egalitarianism and radical communalism. All this against Jewish purity regulations, Mediterranean patronage structures and “civilization’s timeless inclination to draw lines.”

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16There is a friendly joke circulating among Jesus scholars: Burton Mack’s Jesus was killed in a car accident on a freeway in Los Angeles. The point: for Mack, there is no significant connection between what Jesus was like and the fact that he was executed. His death was, in an important sense, accidental.” Marcus J. Borg, “Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship,” *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, 1994), pp. 18–43 at p. 38, n. 28; the chapter reprints his article by the same title for *Harvard Theological Review,* 84 (1991), pp. 1–22.


18See note 1 above.

19Crossan, *Historical Jesus,* p. xii. He further develops his conjecture about Jesus’ post-Johannine lapse from apocalyptic on pp. 237f.

political agreement—some combination (or Crossan is vague here) of the
press and the elite.

oppose on both the religious and political level, & "nationalistic
Contemporary..."

Jesus was the Temple's "functional opposition"—hence, Jewish,
philosophy, and now in the 21st century, the concept of 
"nationalism" has taken on new meaning to Jews, particularly to
Israel, as it struggles with identity and the political implications of 
this identity. It is this "nationalism" that is the same, but this time, 
within the context of the Temple sit-in in Jerusalem. A Revolution

...did the iniquities of peasant culture in general..."
This Jesus lives in two first-century Jewish contexts. The first is with Jewish peasants. This society, reconstructed through an appeal to historical sociology and social anthropology (Lenski, Hobsbawm, Wilson, and so on), turns out to be only incidentally Jewish. Jesus’ operative context is generic Mediterranean peasant society. I quote Crossan: “Such egalitarianism [as the type preached and practiced by Jesus] stems not only from peasant Judaism but, even more deeply, from peasant society as such.”29 “Magic and meal or miracle and table”—Jesus’ program, as Crossan defines it—“is pointed directly and deliberately at . . . the very heart of ancient Mediterranean society.”30 Jewish religion itself, argues Crossan, thus made no essential difference in Jewish peasant behavior. I’m sure that the poor Romans (and the Seleucids before them) would have wished that it were so.

The second Jewish context, the one that matters most for Crossan’s understanding of Jesus’ behavior, is “purity” within “Temple” Judaism, the opposite of what Jesus stands for. He is egalitarian; this Judaism is hierarchical and patriarchal. He is inclusive; it is exclusive. He is liberating; it is oppressive. He stands for “unbrokered” religion; it is the Salomon Brothers of first-century religion.31 This definition of Judaism, much as the picture of Galilee’s grinding poverty, seems generated partly by the socio-anthropological method32 and partly by the necessities of Crossan’s plot: Purity-Judaism provides his Jesus with some ideological traction.

It also explains the growth of the later church. Christianity took over the inclusive missionary traditions of Hellenistic Judaism and enriched them with “the enabling vision and abiding presence of Jesus.”33 The Jewish wars against Rome in 66, 115, and 132, however, “facilitated the move from levitical to rabbinical Judaism, and also the ascendency of exclusive over inclusive Judaism.”34 Christians were inclusive; rabbinical Jews were exclusive.35 Both religions, Crossan assures us, are or were

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29Ibid., p. 263.
30Ibid., p. 304.
31Cf. Historical Jesus, p. 360, quoted above; similarly Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 133.
32Cf., for a different construal of the same evidence, Freyne, Galilee, p. 28 (on the danger of using social models to generate sociological facts about first-century Galilee); p. 39 (the good health of the Galilean economy); pp. 155–175 (more on Galilean economies); also David Adan-Bayewitz, Common Pottery in Roman Galilee: A Study of Local Trade (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), especially ch. 11. Jim Strange notes that “from archaeological surveys in Galilee it is possible to posit another dimension of social reality. It seems that there are more farmers on small plots of land than those plots will support. This suggests that the small land owner had to work for wages for somebody else at least part of the time, or else develop a specialty on the side which could be marketed. Thus the simple designation ‘peasant’ for this social stratum is misleading, since these people appear to have also been artisans and small entrepreneurs as well as agricultural laborers.” (my emphasis). “First-Century Galilee,” p. 89. Lenski’s model might not speak to this more varigated social picture.
33Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 423.
34Ibid., p. 421.
35Crossan seems to envisage a market competition, wherein “inclusive” Christians outsold “exclusive” Jews in the race to convert the empire: “Did Judaism give too little in
Christian, Thyoun J. T. 394.
"Theology Today, p. 98.
reness, p. 25.
2 reness, p. 29.


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was state terrorism; its function was to deter resistance to revolt . . . and the body was usually left on the cross to be consumed by wild beasts. No wonder we have found only one body [the Giv’at ha-Mivtar skeleton of Yehochanan] from all the thousands crucified around Jerusalem in that single century. Remember those dogs. And if you seek the heart of darkness, follow the dogs.\textsuperscript{40}

I honor this kind of effort. It takes a stand for divine consistency and against “historical malfeasance” (Crossan’s excellent phrase). Treating supernatural claims as historical data is cheating, unless we are willing to honor all supernatural claims as historical. So Crossan translates these claims into more rational terms: metaphor, guilty revision. Whether such translations are persuasive is another issue. Jesus’ healing miracles and exorcisms can, of course, be explained in other ways, such as by an appeal to psychosomatic healing, auto-suggestion, and other such phenomena we are familiar with today. I incline to see Jesus as that kind of healer, rather than as someone who regards disease as a social metaphor but changes nothing. For one thing, I doubt many afflicted peasants would have flocked to him for a cure and returned home satisfied with a hug.\textsuperscript{41}

But the resurrection is something else. The movement stands or falls with it, and I cannot imagine so many people in the first generation changing their lives so radically without taking them at their word. They were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. If they just thought that he had died but his truth went marching on, they could have said that. But they didn’t; they spoke of resurrection. Please read me correctly: I am not saying that Jesus really rose from the dead because his disciples said that he did. I am saying that they really thought he had.

Crossan’s dogs account for the empty tomb. It’s a gripping, horrifying, and powerful image. The resurrection stories as a kind of creative aphasia, however, I find much less compelling. “Those who had originally experienced divine power through his vision and his example continued to do so after his death . . . They talked eventually not just of continued affection . . . but of resurrection. They tried to express what they meant by telling” stories such as the supper at Emmaus. Its “symbolism is obvious, as is the metaphorical condensation of the first years of Christian thought and practice into one parabolic afternoon.” Incapable, for whatever reasons, of saying simply “Jesus died, but I still believe and live according to what he died for,” the early community constructed narrative metaphors whose import was exclusively existential, not historical. “Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40}Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{41}Cf., on healing miracles, Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, pp. 157–173; on the relation of healing to religious authority within Judaism, Geza Vermes, Jesus the Jew (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), pp. 86–98. Ancient texts—pagan, Jewish, and Christian—depict too many miracle-workers and healers for us to reasonably conjecture that all such were actually disguised reports of social critique.
\textsuperscript{42}Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 197.
Jesus, the Anti-Nationalist

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would not be indicting the Temple itself. But given what the Temple stood for, how could he not? The overturned tables express a mixture of anger, protest, and indictment, a repudiation of what the Temple had become: "the center of a purity system that was also a system of economic and political oppression."53

Wright picks up this picture and expands it. The Temple was at the dark heart of the purity system. Defilement could not only separate someone from communal life, it also "meant dissociation from the people of the covenant God."54 The only way to attain forgiveness—and here Wright seems to say that impurity requires "forgiveness" as opposed to purification—was to go to the Temple and perform rituals and worship.55

Beyond ritual purity, Judaism was also focused on "racial purity," and had been ever since the return from Babylon. Who was a pure-bred Jew? Works especially from the Roman period dwelled on race as the criterion of belonging to the true people, and this racist emphasis was particularly instantiated in the Temple, which forbade entrance to Gentiles past the outer court.56

Finally, the Temple was the site of animal sacrifices. "We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that most Jews took part in the sacrificial system, but we do not know why..."57 Wright detects a clue to a "sub- or semi-conscious meaning": "If the Exile itself was seen as 'death' and therefore the return from exile as a 'resurrection'," then "it is not a long step to see the death of Israel as in some sense sacrificial. Exile itself is to be understood as a sacrifice."58 Sacrifices were thus a strange sort of historical and existential metaphor, the dramatic reenactment of the movement of judgment and salvation.59

First-century Jews, it turns out, had an excellent sense of the possibilities of metaphor, because this is also how they understood apocalyptic language, in particular of the coming kingdom. They knew that such words did not refer to the end of the space-time universe. "There is abundant evidence that they...knew a good metaphor when they saw one."60 It is wrong to think that Jews took mythological language literally. Such language was part of a "complex metaphor system" that served to invest history with theological significance.61

Jesus sought to reform his native religion, and he had his work cut out for him. Against a tradition that excluded sick people as ritually unclean and, thus, cut off from the people of God, Jesus went out to the sick.62

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52Ibid., p. 113.
53Ibid., p. 115.
55Ibid.
57Ibid., p. 274.
58Ibid., p. 276.
59Ibid.
60Ibid., p. 333.
61Ibid., p. 424.
62Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, manuscript page 182.
Thus, a Passover Jesus went up to Jerusalem to continue the Temple.

In the view that he was holding out to them, to follow in this way the Passover would fall upon those Jews who were returning to Jerusalem, the Passover feast in which the ergonomic usual was associated with Yahweh’s action, when Jesus returned to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, he caused the Temple to be cleansed. This Passover, Jesus used, to clear the Temple of the pinch of oppression and the pinch of the rich. Jesus said the Temple was also the center and symbol of justice, but more than that, more than a social and political institution. The Temple was also the center and symbol of justice.

In one word, Jesus was “transfiguring a way of life that was no other than a new way of life.” In one word, Jesus was “transforming a way of life that was no other than a new way of life.”

The Temple was also the center and symbol of justice, but more than that, more than a social and political institution. The Temple was also the center and symbol of justice.

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of Yahweh's at. This was the reception coming even he saw one, misread by later wheedling God himself as unattributes of Deuteronomy phase in the be demarcated to Jesus, people of forgiveness.68 it has no further deeper metaphorical symbol of Judaic key to Jesus' s to repent of lapses most of all, to change their at confrontation of the kingdom, or, Jesus told a \[72\] HWH's action o were refusing at the Temple. cement.73 How Jesus projected persecution and sanctity personae wisdom. Jerusalem not change, the Temple will be destroyed within that generation. Its fall would be his vindication.78 The devastation of Jerusalem–Babylon will signal the end of the exile for the people of God, namely, Jesus' own followers.79 Thus, the kingdom of God will come, here on earth in the time-space world.80

This hypothesis is coherent and parsimonious, offering the simplest explanation so far of the rise of Christianity: Jesus created it. We have to ask ourselves, though, Is this reconstruction plausible? First-century Judaism and Jesus' mission transmute into huge abstractions; everything mediates metaphor. We, of course, are capable of reading these texts like this, as Wright has just demonstrated. But, in principle, what evidence can we have that first-century Jews "unconsciously" or "subconsciously" thought this way too?

Perhaps, again, Jesus did think that God's Torah (that is, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) was an outdated set of taboos, but we have no evidence that he did, and, in the behavior of the later church, we actually have counterevidence. If he had taught or, mysteriously, embodied an anti-Torah message, his apostles—the ultimate link in the chain connecting the New Testament texts to Jesus of Nazareth—evidently entirely misunderstood him. On the evidence of Paul's letters, the Gospels, and Acts, these apostles chose to live in Jerusalem, worship in the Temple, and keep the festivals, the Sabbath, and the food laws.81 Could they really have understood nothing?

This view reduces the purity codes and the operation of the Temple to a weird system combining caste and sacrament, ossifying society along class lines. This picture is simply false. Impurity is not sin. It is removed not through forgiveness (which is in any case not "dispensed" at the Temple) but through purification. Most forms of impurity could be dealt with (I paraphrase Sanders here) by a quick wash and waiting for the sun

78ibid., ms. pp. 324, 344.
80The concept is elaborate. Since the book is not yet in print, I quote a key passage in full from the typescript: "As a prophet, Jesus staked his reputation on his prediction of the Temple's fall within a generation, and when it fell he would thereby be vindicated. As the kingdom-bearer, he had constantly been acting ... in a way which invited the conclusion that he thought he had the right to do and be what the Temple did and was, thereby implicitly making the Temple redundant. The story he had been telling, and by which he had ordered his life, demanded a particular ending. If, then, the Temple remained forever, and his movement fizzed out ... he would be shown to be a charlatan, a false prophet—maybe even a blasphemer. But if the Temple is destroyed and the sacrifices stopped; if the pagan hordes tear it down stone by stone; and if his followers escaped the conflagration unharmed, in a re-enactment of Israel's escape from their exile in doomed Babylon—why then is he vindicated, not only as a prophet, but as Israel's representative, as (in some sense) the 'son of man'" (Wright, MS, p. 334).
81Living in Jerusalem, Lk. 24:52; Acts 1:12 and passim; Gal. 1:17-21; worshiping in the Temple, Lk. 24:53; Acts 3:1, 5:12, 42; 21:26ff. (Paul); 22:17 (again); specifically sacrificing, Mt. 5:23-24; Sabbaths, e.g., Mk 16:1 and parallels, especially Lk. 23:56b ("On the sabbath day they rested according to the commandment"); fasts, Mt. 6:16-18; festivals, Acts 2:1 (Pentecost, i.e., Shavuot); cf., perhaps, 1 Cor. 16:8; food laws, Acts passim and especially Peter's vision, 10:10-16; Gal. 2:12, and the controversy generally. For discussion, Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, pp. 245-269; on confusions resulting from conflating the evangelical portraits with the Pauline evidence, Fredriksen, From Jesus to Christ, pp. 102-112.
Jesus

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movement out of this group. Further, the accusation in Acts 21:28–29, that Paul brought Gentiles into the Temple past their boundary, presupposes sacrifice; prayer alone could have been offered anywhere.

If however, by “the early Christians” Wright means “the first followers of Jesus,” some awkward data still lie scattered around. Where does he think Jesus picked up his lamb for the seder envisaged in Mark 14? What’s the point of the instruction on how the Christian should offer at the altar in Matthew 5:23–24? Why does Paul still praise the latreia, the Temple cult, in his hymn to Israel’s divine privileges in Romans 9? Why, indeed, does Paul (who had no self-esteem problems) see his apostleship in terms of a “priestly service” (Rom. 15:16)? Metaphor, true, just as Christ sacrificed as a paschal lamb, but why use such images as metaphors if Jesus himself had condemned their referents as morally, socially, and religiously wrong?

To review, we have four Jesuses. We have one apocalyptic Jesus (two, counting mine, of whom I haven’t spoken yet). He caused a scene in the Temple to symbolically enact a prophecy of impending redemption (Sanders). We have two non-apocalyptic Jesuses, a Cynic and a Jewish Cynic. The Cynic Jesus went up to Jerusalem as a normal pilgrim and was killed—no Temple tantrum (Mack, Seeley). The Jewish Cynic Jesus went up for the first time in his life that one Passover. Disgusted by what he saw (he had had no idea, remember, what Jerusalem would be like), he overturned the tables, thereby symbolically destroying the Temple’s brokerage function (Crossan). And, finally, we have one metaphorically apocalyptic anti-nationalist Jesus who went up to Jerusalem at Passover to confront the Temple system, which he symbolically challenged, indicted and condemned (Borg, Wright).

**JESUS: ANOTHER VIEW**

What about my Jesus?

In 1988 I published *From Jesus to Christ*. My study traced the growth of apocalyptic Jewish traditions from the historical Jesus to the Christs of the early churches, especially in light of the kingdom’s continuing delay. For my reconstruction, I drew particularly on Sanders’ work. Thus, I had an apocalyptic Jesus who went up to Jerusalem for Passover at or as the climax of his mission. He symbolically enacted the Temple’s impending destruction. The gesture implied no condemnation of his native religion but, rather, announced the imminent coming of a new Temple and, hence, as well, God’s kingdom. The act brought him to the attention of the priests, who became alarmed at the potential for mass disturbance during the holiday when Pilate was in town. They facilitated his arrest, and Pilate killed him.89

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The Christian: was killed—there was no Temple lament. "The Christ Jesus went up to Jerusalem as a normal pilgrim and mission in all..."

John, who was probably the author of the Gospel, would have felt the loss of the Temple keenly. He would have missed the Temple, its structure, its rituals, its sacrifices. But he would have understood that the Temple was not the center of the Christian's faith. The Temple was a symbol of the Old Covenant, but the New Covenant had arrived. The Christian did not need the Temple to understand the message of Jesus. The Christian understood that the true temple was the body of Christ, and that the true sacrifice was the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Christian was free, not bound by the laws and rituals of the Temple. The Christian was free to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, to spread the message of salvation, to make disciples of all nations. The Christian was free to be the Temple of God, to be the body of Christ, to be the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
Blessed?” “I am.” (14:6ff.) The Temple action sets up the theological climax of the Gospel.

John needs no such device. His Jesus has preached a very high christology virtually since his first appearance. Consequently, unlike Mark, John does not need (two!) highly charged Sanhedrin trials to bear the weight of articulating Christian doctrine. His Jesus, again, had already assumed that task. The Johannine sequence of events, less dramatic, is also less improbable: Jesus comes to town, preaches, and is arrested the night before the night of Passover. He is detained briefly at the High Priest’s house, where he is questioned “about his disciples and his teaching” (18:19). He, then, passes on to Pilate. The priests’ motivation is clear and commonsensical: “If we let [Jesus] go on, ... the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” Caiaphas continues, “It is expedient that one man should die for the people, that the whole nation not perish” (11:48,50).

So what do I now think happened? Shortly after John the Baptist’s execution, Jesus would have carried on preaching his message of the coming kingdom, meant literally: Justice established, Israel restored and redeemed, the heavenly Temple “not built by the hands of man” in Jerusalem, the resurrection of the dead, and so on. He gathered followers, some itinerant like himself, others settled in villages. He went up to Jerusalem for Passover—perhaps he always did; I don’t know. Then, he went back to the Galilee, and continued preaching and healing. Next Passover, up again, and back again.

And then, perhaps on the third year, he identified that Passover as the one on which the kingdom would arrive. I’m guessing, of course, but for several reasons. In the (very reworked) traditions of the triumphal entrance, we may have a genuine echo of the enthusiasm and excitement of this particular pilgrimage. Also, to the other side of events, we have the traditions about the resurrection. I take this fact as one measure of the level of excitement and conviction on the part of Jesus’ followers. They went up expecting an eschatological event, the arrival of the kingdom. What they got instead was the crucifixion. But then, an unexpected eschatological event happened: They were convinced that Jesus had been raised.

Why? Had Jesus named that Passover as the last? Within apocalyptic movements, a specifically named date concentrates and raises eschatological attention and prompts fence-sitters to commit to the movement (I draw here on O’Leary’s analysis of the Millerites in the 1840s). Perhaps

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92 John also knew some version of the Temple incident. He placed it early in Jesus’ ministry, where its significance is mostly symbolic; it sets the tone for Jesus’ relations with official Judaism, and it foreshadows the Passion (2:13–22). He may have gotten it from Mark—the issue is contested—or he may have gotten it from an independent tradition.

93 Mk. 11:1–10 and parallels.

94See Arguing the Apocalypse on the growth of the Millerites—especially after the failure of Miller’s apocalyptic prediction (also known as “The Great Disappointment”) of March 1844—into the Seventh Day Adventist Church, pp. 99–133.
Faith, History, and Method

Theology Today
accustomed to take over without critical examination. But now it is necessary to inquire whether it is really possible... to employ the idea of the Kingdom of God in the way that has recently seemed appropriate. The question arises whether "Kingdom" is not thereby divested of its essential traits and, finally, so modified that only the name still remains the same.

So Johannes Weiss, in 1892.99

One scholar reviewed refuted the possibility of an apocalyptic Jesus on the basis of how weird apocalyptists are now: "Most of us have heard street preachers... whose message is, 'The end is at hand, repent!' In my experience, people who strongly believe 'the end is near' sound very different from what I hear in the Jesus tradition."100 This is not an argument. Another scholar defended the authenticity of Jesus' (fairly detailed) predictions of the fall of Jerusalem with an appeal to Josephus. Such prophecies of the Temple's destruction are "the necessary and predictable focal point of Jesus' whole prophetic ministry... Like Josephus, he claimed to see that destruction was inevitable."101 Jesus died around 30. The Temple was destroyed in 70. Josephus, who was present at the siege, wrote his history in 77–78. Josephus’ successful “prediction” cannot, thus, establish the likelihood of Jesus’ having done the same thing.

And again: "If Jesus expected the end of the world, then he was mistaken."102 But if he did, and if he was, so what? Do historians in search of Jesus of Nazareth really expect to turn up the Chalcedonian Christ? The invariant incarnate Second Article of the Trinity, fully God and fully man without mixture or confusion, is the theological construct of a different period. If we want to find this figure in the first century, the historical Jesus is not whom we’re looking for. History can be reconciled, variously, with faith, but never with anachronism.

My second concluding point concerns the Christian study of Judaism. In many of these studies of the historical Jesus, Judaism still serves as the dark backdrop rather than the living context of Jesus and the early church. Something bad had happened to Judaism after the exile, and by Jesus’ time it had run completely down hill. Think of the descriptions we have been offered. First-century Judaism was economically and politically oppressive, exclusive, hierarchical, patriarchal, and money oriented. It focused excessively on ritual purity, racial purity, and nationalism, and it encouraged meaness to sick people.

Sanders’ 1977 book Paul and Palestinian Judaism finally removed the Pharisees from the cross-hairs of Christian historical fantasy. But the

100Borg, Jesus, p. 83.
101Wright, MS 326, on Jesus’ “mindset.”
102Wright, MS 88.
The old polemical expression "law versus grace" has simply been replaced by an even more self-congratulatory antithesis, often without recognition. The shift is not only a matter of language, but of perspective. The former emphasizes the contrast between the two systems, while the latter tends to obscure the nuanced interplay between them.

Thus, the shift from "law versus grace" to "purity versus compassion" is not merely a change in terminology. It reflects a deeper transformation in how we perceive and practice Christianity. This change is evident in the way we understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and how we interprete the teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

The shift also raises important questions about the role of law and grace in the Christian faith. Are they opposed or complementary? How do we balance obedience to God's law with His love and compassion?

Ultimately, the shift from "law versus grace" to "purity versus compassion" is a call to reflect more deeply on the nature of Christianity and its relevance in today's world.
historical description and its explanation. A perfect fit! History this tidy is a form of aesthetic delusion.

Consider Judaism as focused on racial purity, which in turn was expressed in the Temple regulations keeping Gentiles in the outer courts. Did the priests really refuse members of the house of Adiabene entry into the Temple? Of course not. If converts enter, the operative category is not “race.” Or consider the claim that Jews viewed wealth as a sign of God’s favor. The ruling elites in Judea ensconced by Rome should have been more effective: these were chosen on the basis of wealth. In fact, they failed to rule, in no small part, according to Martin Goodman, because wealth did not command social esteem among Jews, among other reasons because the religious regulations mandating charity weakened the webbing of patronage. Or consider the Temple as a center of virulent nationalism. How do the priests and “first men” act, according to Josephus, whenever an outbreak threatens? They try to quiet the crowds. But in most of the studies we have considered, method has so controlled historical reconstruction that these nonconforming data simply disappear.

This brings me to my final point, on method and history. The methods of other fields refresh and challenge our work in our own, and I think this is all to the good. But we need to be sensitive to the utility of the method; and we can never let the method control the evidence. We—the historians—must control both.

If we relinquish control, or fail to exercise it, or so enjoy where the method is taking us that we fail to direct our own way, we risk wandering in a past exclusively of our own imagining, distant not only from our own time, but also from the reality of those ancient persons whose lives and worlds we seek to understand.

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104 See, for example, Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 292, where his four-fold typology generates Jesus’ social role and function (“My proposal is that when we cross apocalyptic and sapiential with scribes and peasants, it becomes necessary to locate Jesus in the quadrant formed by sapiential and peasant.”).

105 The most notable sign of the emphasis on racial purity is, of course, the notice in the Temple that forbade non-Jews to penetrate farther than the “court of the Gentiles,” Wright, *People of God*, p. 232. See also Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, p. 109.

106 The failure of wealth to bring social esteem among Jews was only partly caused by the egalitarian ideals of the Torah. . . . Neither Hebrew nor Aramaic had a term like the Latin *bonus*, which equated high social standing and morality with riches. . . . The prestige gained by many rich Greeks and Romans by paying for their city’s religious cults was undermined by the uniquely Jewish and deliberately egalitarian tradition that every adult male Jew should pay a half-shekel towards the upkeep of the sacrifices, the rich being positively prohibited from contributing more (Exodus 30:15) . . . .” Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 128f., also pp. 51–75.

107 For example, *Bellum*, 2.316, trying to calm the crowds in the face of Florus’ provocations; 2.530, urging the crowd to follow Florus’ wishes; 2.410, attempting to persuade the younger priests in not to suspend sacrifices for Rome’s wellbeing.