



FATHERS OF FAITH

'WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?'

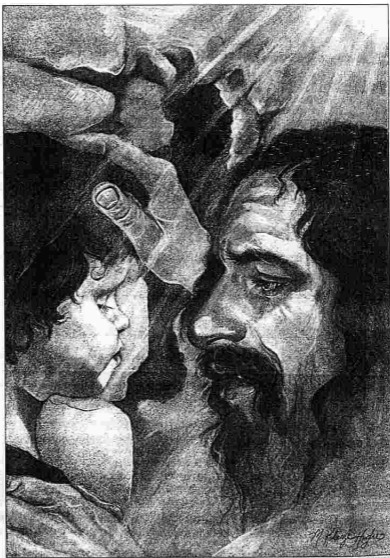
The Modern Quest for the Ancient Jesus

Paula Fredriksen

The answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" will depend upon the commitments of the person responding. If he is a Christian, however, certain common elements will probably appear no matter what his particular church: Jesus is the son of God, the second person of the Trinity, and through him salvation comes to the world. The historian, too, whatever his personal religious beliefs, will affirm what the traditional believer also holds to be true, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth stands at the source of Christianity. But the person wishing to pursue the historical question ("Who *was* Jesus?") as distinct from the theological one ("Who *is* Jesus?") will encounter a striking anomaly when turning to the New Testament in pursuit of the historical figure. The Jesus of the Gospels is not a Christian.

The sacred texts of Judaism, from Exodus through Deuteronomy, present Moses as a Jew. The Muhammad who speaks in the Qur'an is, unquestionably, a Muslim. But the Jesus of Christianity's own foundational texts worships in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21, and frequently) and in the temple on the great feast days of Passover and Tabernacles (Mark 11-14; John 2:13; 7:2). He journeys to

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Jerusalem even for nonbiblical holidays, such as the festival celebrating the purification of the temple (the origin of the modern holiday Hanukkah, John 10:22). He wears ritual fringes, the *tzitzit* of Numbers and Deuteronomy, to remind himself of God's commandments (Num. 15:38-40; Deut. 22:12; Mark 6:56). He recites the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength," and teaches by quoting Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; cf. Mark 12:29-31). The God he worships is the God of Israel. The Jesus of the Gospels is a Jew.

FROM JESUS TO CHRIST

What accounts for this difference between Jesus' worship and the worship of Jesus? The growth and evolution of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. From the earliest stratum of New Testament evidence, the letters of Paul—written by mid-first century, within twenty years of Jesus' execution—we know four crucial data. The first three coherently sketch the social, geographic, and linguistic consequences of the earliest movement's vigor: First, the balance of members in the movement had already, by midcentury, begun its momentous shift from primarily Jewish to increasingly Gentile. Second, the movement was

spreading out from its points of origin in the communities in Judaea and Galilee to the cities of Asia Minor and the wider Mediterranean. Third, the spoken language of the movement had shifted from Aramaic to Greek, which in turn affected the version of the biblical texts that members used: The Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, the Septuagint, served as sacred Scripture.

But the fourth datum represents the most momentous change of all. In Paul's letters—and therefore within his Gentile Christian communities—Jesus was already being spoken of as a superhuman, cosmic entity, not as "a" son of God (a common biblical locution that can refer to angels, pious persons, or indeed the whole people of Israel) but as *the* Son of God. According to Paul, Jesus as Son had had a life before coming into the body, dwelt presently in the heavens with God the Father, and would return to defeat the cosmic forces of wickedness: sin, the flesh, death itself (Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Thess. 4:15-17; 1 Cor. 15:20-28).

It would be a mistake to look at this theological development as some sort of Gentile mutation of an earlier, less grandiose Jewish gospel. Paul himself, its spokesman in these letters, was a Jew, Pharisaic in his scriptural orientation and impeccable, as he informs his Gentile believers, when it came to keeping the Torah: "As to righteousness under the Law [I was] blameless" (Phil. 3:6). He was in contact with other Christian missionaries who, like him, were also Jews (e.g.,

2 Cor. 11:22); and he took pains to coordinate his version of the Christian message with "those who were apostles before me"—Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John, to name three (Gal. 1:17-18; 2:1-2).

When quarrels between them break out, the argument is over Gentile observance of Jewish Law; Should Gentiles be circumcised, that is convert to Judaism, if they have come to worship the God of Israel through Jesus Christ? Can they or should they eat meat sacrificed to idols? Need they change their sexual behavior? Could they continue worshiping their traditional gods, too? Paul says one thing, his fellow Jewish apostles say another. On some points they agree (none endorsed sexual profligacy or idol worship), on others they differ (some thought that Gentiles-in-Christ should convert to Judaism, Paul did not). But no one seems to argue (again, from what we have in Paul's letters) about the elevated status Paul attributes to Jesus. Silence as a datum in historical evidence is difficult to interpret, but there it is: On this point—the point that marks the absolute difference between the Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of Christian tradition—we find no quarrel at all.

One hundred years later, at mid-second century, already forms of Christianity as a religion distinct from (and eventually hostile to) Judaism existed. From that time on, traditions about Jesus of Nazareth—concerning that slice of his life between his immersion by John the Baptist and his crucifixion by Pilate, which

all four of our Gospels present—were interpreted through the concepts of high theology, many of which had been generated specifically by the tensions between the human being the Gospels portray and the divine entity whom the tradition articulated and revered. If Jesus were divine, then how divine was he? (By the fourth century, the answer was, "Fully divine," that is, as much God as God the Father.) Did he really have a fleshly body, or had he only appeared "in the likeness of flesh . . . in the form of a man"?¹ (Again by the fourth century, and after much controversy, orthodox tradition taught the Doctrine of the Incarnation: Jesus really had had real flesh.) If he truly had flesh, how had he obtained it? (Again by the fourth century: through a virgin mother, who was herself the product of an immaculate conception.)

QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

These ways of looking at Jesus—reading the Gospels through the lens of complex metaphysical theology—began to change as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation, with its principled turn from Catholic doctrine and its increased emphasis on Scripture. Some two centuries later, in the wake of the Enlightenment, scholars took the evolving techniques of scientific historical research—critical and comparative use of ancient sources, attention to historical context and original languages, secular-

1. The phrases come from Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (2:7-8). Paul's inconsistency on this point—where he speaks of Jesus both as a cosmic agent who only looked or seemed human, as here, and as an ensouled Jewish male (e.g., "born of woman, born under the Law," Gal. 2:4; "descended from David according to the flesh," Rom. 1:3)—contributed to those later wars of interpretation on Jesus' physical and human status.



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ization of agency (demons and angels, for instance, cede to other forms of causation)—and applied them to the Gospels themselves. The result was the modern quest for the historical Jesus.

The first phase of the quest, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was impelled by the scholarly reevaluation of the nature of the Gospels as historical documents. Church tradition had long linked the four canonical Gospels to the "golden generation" of Jesus' first followers, thereby authorizing these texts for believers. Thus the First Gospel, Matthew, though preserved in Greek, was thought to have been written first in Hebrew or Aramaic. Authorship was ascribed to the tax collector who joined Jesus' twelve original disciples (Matt. 9:9). Matthew comes first in the canonical quartet because those ancient Christians who kept it regarded it as historically the first to be written. The Fourth Gospel, the canon's other putatively eyewitness account, was ascribed to John "the beloved disciple" of Jesus. The Second and Third Gospels, by contrast, were connected with the two premier apostles, Peter and Paul, by attributing authorship to two companions: thus, "Mark" wrote down the apostle Peter's reminiscences;

and a (Gentile) physician and traveling companion of Paul's named "Luke" wrote the Third Gospel, as well as the Acts of the Apostles.

All these attributions began to erode under scholarly scrutiny. The church traditions on which they rested, historians noted, went back no earlier than the second century. Ecclesiastical titles notwithstanding, the Gospels themselves had originally circulated anonymously, and in a crowded field: Different ancient communities had kept different gospels. Scholars further began to note patterns of literary dependency between the first three Gospels,² and many concluded that Mark, not Matthew, must be the earliest. They shifted the dates of the Gospels' composition from the first generation of believers to one to two generations later: Mark, written just prior to or after the Roman destruction of the temple in A.D. 70; the two Gospels that depend on him, Matthew and Luke, correspondingly later. John, given its sophisticated theology, may have come later still. And they noted that the original language of Matthew could only have been Greek: The text relies on biblical prophecies that work only if the version cited were the Septuagint, not the Hebrew.³

² Scholars refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke collectively as the Synoptic Gospels, because they can be seen (*opsis*) together (*syn-*) their relation to the Fourth Gospel. John, remains controversial, whatever John's sources, he tells a very different story from those of the first three evangelists.

³ The Septuagint (academic shorthand: LXX) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures begun in the third century B.C.E. by and for Greek-speaking Jews. It differed significantly from the Hebrew in many places, most notoriously for our current purpose in its translation of Isa. 7:14. In the original Hebrew, a young girl (*'almah*) conceives and bears a child. The correlative Greek word should have been *parthenos*, but the LXX gave, instead, *parthenos*, or "virgin" (for which Hebrew has its own word, *betulah*). Perhaps in





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Freer than ever before from the dictates of theology, scholars began to distinguish between the Christ of faith (the figure of theological reflection) and the Jesus of history (the human being who had lived and died in the first third of the first century). Those who wished to reconstruct the Jesus of history began using these traditional Christian texts not as sacred scripture but as ancient evidence, distinguishing between the data mediated by evangelical tradition and using only those that seemed valid, historically, to them.

By the end of the nineteenth century, these academic reconstructions had polarized around two options: Jesus the teacher of ethics, a sort of liberal Protestant himself preaching "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" (so Adolf Harnack); or Jesus the prophet and self-designated messiah preaching the apocalyptic Kingdom of God (so Albert Schweitzer in his great classic *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*). With the vast increase in historical and archaeological knowledge in the course of the twentieth century and the burgeoning of analytic

models drawn from other disciplines—social and cultural anthropology, sociology, literary criticism—interpretive possibilities have only multiplied ever since. The paperbacks proliferate as the range of portraits broadens.

In recent scholarship, Jesus has been imagined and presented as a type of first-century shaman figure; as a Cynic-sort of wandering wise man; as a visionary radical and social reformer preaching egalitarian ethics to the destitute; as a Galilean regionalist alienated from the elitism of Judean religious conventions (like the temple and the Torah); as a champion of national liberation and, on the contrary, as its opponent and critic—on and on. All these figures are presented with rigorous academic argument and methodology; all are defended with appeals to the ancient data. Debate continues at a rolling pitch, and consensus—even on issues so basic as what constitutes evidence and how to construe it—is a distant hope.

Not only is it difficult, then, to state simply a reasonably coherent description of the life and message of Jesus, but it is

the third or second century B.C.E. the word was ambiguous, like the English word *maid* or *maiden*, whose first reference is to the girl's youth and only secondarily, or by inference, to her sexual status. Matthew's birth story, however, requires that Mary be, quite specifically, a virgin. The Hebrew Bible could not have helped him here. Conclusion: This evangelist, whoever he was, read and wrote in Greek. The Two-Source Hypothesis, the current academic consensus, holds that both Matthew and Luke independently drew on Mark's Gospel, especially for their narrative chronologies (all three present a Jesus who lives and works primarily in Galilee and who goes to Jerusalem once, at the end of his ministry. John's Jesus, by contrast, frequents Jerusalem and appears in Galilee only rarely). Additionally, these two later evangelists relate many of the same sayings of Jesus that do not appear in Mark. How so? Scholars speculate that they had independent access to another Greek source, whether written or oral, consisting primarily of sayings. This hypothetical source is known as "Q."

nearly impossible to construct an interpretation with which all serious scholars currently working in the field would agree. How, then, can we proceed, if we wish to glimpse the Jesus of history?

I believe that we need to start with the issue that first generated the quest and its controversies: We need first to consider the sources.

GOSPEL TRUTH

The Age of Innocence with respect to the status of the Gospels as historical documents closed definitively two centuries ago. All scholarly reconstructions of Jesus must now begin by acknowledging the gap—social, cultural, linguistic, and historical—that yawns between their subject and the earliest sources that we have for him. Jesus of Nazareth was a Galilean Jew whose vernacular language was Aramaic (a close linguistic cousin of Hebrew) and whose teachings were exclusively oral (we have no writings from him, nor do early sources claim that any ever existed). In the course of an itinerant public mission, he seems to have traveled for the most part within territorial Israel: through the villages of Galilee in the north; through Samaria on his way to Judaea in the south; and in Jerusalem proper, perhaps with occasional excursions across the Jordan.

This is another way of saying that Jesus' original audience, like himself, would have been for the most part Aramaic-speaking Jews living in Jewish ter-

ritory. But the language of the evangelists is Greek, and their medium written, not oral. Their period of composition appears to have been sometime during the final third of the first century, between 70 to 100 C.E.—that is to say, one or possibly two generations after the lifetime of Jesus and also sometime after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70. And their locations of origin could have been anywhere in the Greek-speaking cities of the empire.

In brief, whereas Jesus' teaching was oral and his setting Jewish, Aramaic, and largely rural, the evangelists' is written, mixed (that is, probably both Jewish and to some degree or other also Gentile), linguistically Greek, and probably urban. Flung out over the gap between these distinctions—across time, space, culture, and ethnicity—were the human filaments of oral tradition. Ultimately, elements of many of the stories and sayings presented in the Gospels probably do go back across these various frontiers to the original followers of Jesus. We must suppose this, or else abandon the thought of any connection between what the Gospels state and what Jesus said and did. But this supposition hardly puts us on firm ground.

Why not? First of all, even if eyewitness testimony does lie to some extent behind some of the Gospel traditions, that testimony is never scientific or objective, first of all because the witness is human. In this particular case, their conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead, which would have motivated their preserving and circulating these stories, would inevitably have affected the reports



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of prior events that these witnesses gave. Other early members of the movement, not so convinced, would and presumably did speak differently (see, for example, Matt. 28:17). Further, these stories would have been told and retold—by those of the original generation during their lifetimes; by the later, intervening generations for theirs—before achieving the relative stability of writing. Revision and amplification inevitably travel along this chain of transmission, again because its links are human. Since we have no way of comparing later oral traditions with earlier or the earliest ones, the degree of change or distortion introduced into the tradition as it evolved is lost to us, silenced by death.

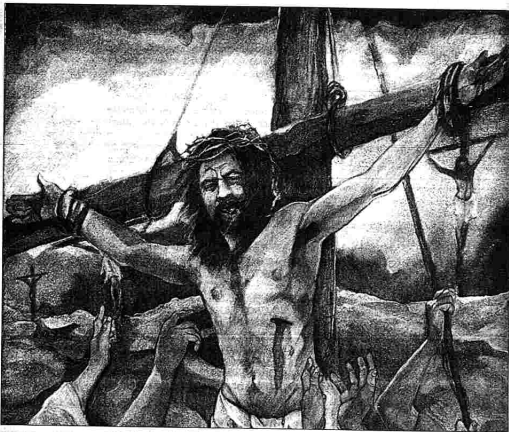
Nor did the eventual achievement of written form fully stabilize these traditions from and about Jesus, as a simple comparison of our four Gospels shows. The Gospels themselves differ. Sometimes the matter is undeniable but seemingly unimportant; for example, at Mark 8:27 Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" whereas at Matt. 16:13 he asks, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" But larger divergences exist. At the end of this scene, the Confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus rebukes Peter as Satan in Mark 8:33 and Matt. 16:23; Luke's Jesus is silent (cf. Luke 9:22); and John's gospel lacks any corresponding scene (though cf. 6:68-69). While Mark's Jesus seems overtly hostile toward some traditional Jewish observances (e.g., Mark 7:1-23, and Mark's

comment at verse 19), Matthew's Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, actively endorses them ("Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them," 5:17). Finally, the evangelists report events that are simply mutually exclusive. It is unlikely that Mary and Joseph's hometown could have been both Bethlehem (the implication of Matt. 1 and 2) and Nazareth (Luke 2:4); or that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple both at the beginning of his mission (John 2:14-16) and at its end (Mark 11:15). Jesus could not have been killed both on the 15th of Nisan (Mark) and on the 14th (John); his last meal with his disciples either was or was not the Passover seder (Mark 14:12; John 13:1). And so on.

HOW YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

To make sense of such contrasting traditions, we have to devise interpretive strategies. Do we harmonize these conflicts somehow? Or do we acknowledge the conflict and then favor one tradition over the other? If so, on what grounds?

Such weighing and choosing, and self-conscious reflection upon the reasons for making our choice, are all part of the process of historical reasoning. Only once the complications and difficulties of the Gospels as historical evidence are seen as clearly as possible can the traditions'



virtues—those places from which, however obliquely, we are afforded a glimpse of the historical figure of Jesus—be relied upon.

Such discrete vantage points in the ancient evidence are discerned wherever we can establish a correspondence of elements in Gospel material with other his-



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torical data derived independently from non-Gospel sources—from Paul's letters, written some fifteen years before the earliest Gospel, Mark; or from the vast body of material preserved in the work of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus; or from other near-contemporary Jewish sources, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Where these lines of evidence converge, where the data thicken, we can begin to construct a first-century Jewish historical context—the native environment of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is the contrast between this context and some of the claims made both by the later Gospels and by the various modern reconstructions of Jesus that enables us to gauge their historical reliability. If either the Gospels or some analysis of them claims or depicts something that cannot plausibly cohere with what else we know about Jesus' period and culture, we have good reason to question its historical validity. In the case of the Gospels, this means considering their depictions in light of anachronism and plausibility. If we know from traditions in both Paul's letters and Acts, for example, that after his death Jesus' original disciples continued to keep the food laws and Sabbath, to live in Jerusalem, and to worship in the tem-

ple, how likely is it that Jesus himself would have preached against these practices during his own lifetime? Either he did, but those closest to him universally missed his point; or he did not, though the Gospels occasionally present him as though he had. (And our next question then has to be: Why did the evangelists choose to do this?)

If Paul as a Christian, writing around C.E. 50, still reveres the temple and the offerings at its altar as two of the many blessings God gave to Israel (Rom. 9:4),⁴ does a Gospel's Jesus who condemns temple sacrifice more likely reflect Jesus' own teaching or a later tradition ascribed to him in the wake of the Roman destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., since it was only after this catastrophe that the evangelists wrote?

No less than these ancient portraits, modern reconstructions must also be submitted to a process of weighing and judging. Their images of Jesus, too, can and must be tested for anachronism and plausibility. This effort is more difficult than it might seem, however, precisely because of the continuing importance of Jesus as a religious figure in our culture. Despite the twenty centuries intervening between our time and his, we still expect, indeed

4. The usual English translations of this passage obscure Paul's meaning. Listing Israel's divinely given prerogatives, Paul gives "the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ." His Greek word for *glory* is *doxa*; behind the Greek is the Hebrew *honor*, which Jews in the period before 70 C.E. associated with God's divine presence, the *Shekinah*, thought to dwell particularly in the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, too, Jesus says in Matt. 23:21: "Whoever swears by the sanctuary swears by it and by Him who dwells in it." Behind the bloodless English word *worship* stands the Greek *leiturgia*, the Hebrew *avodah*. This is not worship in general but precisely the cult of offerings—described in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—sacrificed before the altar in Jerusalem. In this passage, in other words, Paul praises along with all these other things the temple and its cult.

demand, that he make immediate sense to us. This leaves the door open to interpretations that, while making Jesus meaningful to us, would have made him incomprehensible to his contemporaries. To make the same point differently: So powerful is the figure of Jesus that his authority is often invoked to legitimate or endorse the much later ethical concerns and positions of the modern scholar or reader.

The result is a sort of reversed reflection: The historical Jesus is summoned, but the image who appears too often is a (thinly disguised) version of ourselves. The Jesus of the imperial Roman church in the sixth century—beardless, muscular, dressed in battle garb—resembled an idealized Roman general himself. The Jesus of nineteenth-century Germany was, famously, also a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant. The Jesus of the 1960s was a freedom fighter. And the most recent Jesus of the modern academy battles not ancient demons, but our own—sexism, nationalism, social hierarchy.

A simple, indeed commonsensical, observation can help us to renounce the antihistorical seductions of meaningfulness and moral relevance. Whatever it was that Jesus said and did during his mission, it had to make sense first of all to his own first-century Jewish contemporaries—sympathizers, admirers, opponents, enemies. *They* are the audience whom he addressed. Keeping this in mind can help keep us focused on the ancient past. Exorcising the demon of anachronism has its dangers: It means, at the very least, that we must allow for differences to open up between Jesus and ourselves. But if the human, historical figure is the person we seek, such differences must be allowed. Away, then, with the Protestant Jesus who preached the superiority of

grace to works. Away with the radical reformer criticizing society along vaguely Marxian lines. Away with the opponent of a concept of sexism that would have baffled my Neapolitan grandfather, let alone a first-century Mediterranean male (or female).

And finally, away with a Jesus who thinks up his own, radically innovative, utterly unprecedented definitions of *messiah* and *Kingdom of God*. Why? For the simple reason that, whatever else he may have been in later Christian tradition, the Jesus who ultimately stands behind all these later depictions was an early first-century Jew speaking to other early first-century Jews. His contemporaries are the first human context for his message, whatever that message was. It was their response to him that is the reason why we know about Jesus in the first place. What he was saying, then, must have made sense to them. To how many of them? Enough that Jesus had a popular following among his own people in his own lifetime. How popular? Enough to get him into trouble with the Roman governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate.

IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING

It is the end of Jesus' life that is most secure in the historical record. Jesus died on a cross: On this the evidence of Paul, the Gospels, Josephus, and the Roman historian Tacitus all agree. His manner of death implies a context. Crucifixion was a mode of execution that Rome reserved particularly for political insurrectionists. If Jesus died on a cross, then he died in a situation where Pilate was concerned about the effect that Jesus and his message might have had on the crowds massed in Jerusalem that



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Passover. The criminal charge posted over the cross, according to both the Synoptic Gospels and John—The King of the Jews—underscores this point: Claiming (or being acclaimed) a king when it was Rome who chose who ruled does, in fact, seem identifiably seditious.

The Gospels themselves already address this issue: Jesus was the king of Israel, they say; he truly was the king of the Jews, but not in a way that the Jews could understand. "My kingdom is not of this world," John's Jesus informs Pilate (John 18:36). The Synoptic Jesus redefines his reign, too: The first time he comes, he must suffer and die; but when he returns, only then will he come in conspicuous power to gather his elect (see Mark 8 and 13). Pilate indeed crucified Jesus, the evangelists say; and they know perfectly well the political implications of death by crucifixion. For this reason they develop a major apologetic theme in the Passion narratives: Pilate did crucify Jesus, but he made a mistake. The priests impertuned and deceived him. Luke's priests actually lie precisely to inculpate Jesus as a politically dangerous figure: "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ [messiah] a king" (23:2).

But both the brute fact of Jesus' death on the cross and the evangelists' apologetic efforts vis-à-vis Pilate—whom they pres-

ent as virtually being forced against his will to do the job—run head-on into a second, equally incontrovertible fact about the earliest Christian movement: Though Jesus died as an insurrectionist, none of his followers did. No roundup of those who acclaimed him son of David going into Jerusalem for Passover is depicted in the Gospel stories, nor do Pilate's men or the temple guards arrest the disciples, too, when they ambush Jesus at night. Jesus dies alone.

This is odd. If Pilate, whether mistakenly or not, had truly considered Jesus guilty of spearheading a seditious movement, more than just Jesus would have died. Pilate would not and could not have permitted the existence of what he would consider a revolutionary group.⁵ The fact that Jesus alone was killed suggests, then, that Pilate knew perfectly well that Jesus posed no political threat. This observation might seem to support the evangelists' view: Pilate, against his own wishes, acted to accommodate the priests. But then we run head-on against the other fact that began our line of inquiry: Why, then, a crucifixion at all? If for whatever reasons Pilate and/or the priests had wanted Jesus dead, they had many simpler means at their disposal. No public execution was necessary. Indeed, the same Gospels' insistence on Jesus' high popularity that Passover (the priests resolve to have him killed, says Mark 26:5, but "not during the

5. The traditions about Herodias are, for the same reason, incredible. If Pilate, anxious to please his Jewish subjects, would go so far as to release a known insurrectionist and murderer, he would seem have been out of a job.





feast, lest there be a tumult among the people") makes the choice of a public execution that much less coherent within the Gospels' own stories.

BOTH JESUS AND CHRIST

All these elements of the Passion narratives are so generally familiar that it can be difficult to begin to see how odd, and finally incoherent, they actually are. I present them here not to propose a quick solution but to demonstrate one of the immediate benefits of thinking critically about this traditional material. Critical thought can make the familiar strange; or—to rephrase this observation in perhaps more appealing language—it refreshes the material, making the old, the familiar, new. This intellectual exercise is the necessary first step to encountering the historical figure of Jesus. The fear of false familiarity is the beginning of historical wisdom. Insist that Jesus make immediate sense to us, and the past hardens into a mirror, a reflecting surface that will reveal only ourselves. Acknowledge—be unafraid of!—the huge distance between us and Jesus (as between us and any ancient person), and our texts can become windows, not mirrors. We can peer through them to glimpse, however imperfectly, the human realities that ultimately stand behind them.

What then might we see? The human being that even the stilted metaphysics of ancient high theology insisted had to be there. The attempt calls for a certain kind of religious courage, because it means decoupling history from theology and allowing each with integrity to do its respective work. History requires the acknowledgment of difference and the priority of ancient context. This means that,

if we start in search of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, then the person we seek stands with his back to us, his face toward the faces of his own generation.

If as modern believers we nonetheless require that Jesus be morally intelligible and religiously relevant to us, then it is to us that the necessary work of creative reinterpretation falls. Such a project is not historical (the critical construction of an ancient figure) but *theological* (the generation of contemporary meaning within particular religious communities). Multiple and conflicting theological claims inevitably result, as various as the different communities that stand behind them. In this sense, the modern Christian tolerance of doctrinal difference between churches, its principled ecumenism, is a good emotional and ethical model for tolerating historical difference, too. Keeping the distinctions between ancient persons and modern ones in view can prevent the use of false history as a kind of empirical prop for modern theological commitments (e.g., Jesus the antitemple agitator endorsing modern antihierarchicalism). History interprets the past. Theology reinterprets, not the past, but religious tradition.

But theological reinterpretation should neither be mistaken for, nor presented as, historical description. To regard Jesus historically requires releasing him from service to our modern concerns or confessional identity. It means allowing ourselves to see him in his irreducible otherness, the Stranger of Schweitzer's poetic closing description: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. ..." When we renounce the false familiarity proffered us by the dark angels of relevance and anachronism, we can see Jesus, his contemporaries, and perhaps even ourselves more clearly in our common humanity. ■