

## Chapter 12

### ‘ARE YOU A VIRGIN?’ BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

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Using the Septuagint as a quarry for episodes in the life of the historical Jesus is a little like mining Molière for information on the private life of Bill Clinton. There’s the gap in time; there’s the gap in languages; there’s the gap in subject matter – in the latter case perhaps less than in the former. Nonetheless, this is what the apostle Paul and our four canonical evangelists did, and *Brian* refracts some of their biblically enhanced efforts. I would like to consider here some of the implications, some of the effects, and some of the historical and theological consequences of our early writers’ biblical bookishness.

I begin with a truism of historical Jesus research: Jesus’ vernacular was Aramaic. Yet the earliest texts that we have from this movement, Paul’s letters and the Gospels, are in Greek. This linguistic shift might give us a measure of the movement’s rapid diffusion out of Jerusalem into the wider world of the western Diaspora. If Jesus died around 30 CE, if Paul’s letters date to the mid-first century, and if Mark were written sometime shortly after the Temple’s destruction in 70,

then we can trace a trajectory not only linguistic – from Aramaic to Greek – but also geographical – from Judaea to Asia Minor to, possibly, Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Did this linguistic and geographical shift express, as well, an ethnic one, from a Jewish Jesus to a Gentile church? Here this early evidence pulls in two directions. At several places in his letters, mid-first century, Paul gives full-throated expression to his own Jewishness, in tropes that would have made Brian proud. At Philippians 3.6, for example, Paul declares:



‘I’m a Kike! A Yid! A Heebie! A Hook-nose! I’m Kosher, Mum! I’m a Red Sea Pedestrian, and I’m proud of it!’

Oh, sorry: that’s Brian. Here is Paul, in the RSV translation: ‘[I am] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to righteousness under the Law, blameless.’ So too his apostolic competition. ‘Are they Hebrews? So am I! Are they Israelites? So am I! Are they descendants of Abraham! So am I!’ (2 Cor. 11.22). The apostolic muscle-mass of the movement, circa 50 CE, seems – or still seems – to be predominantly Jewish.

On the evidence of Paul’s letters, however, the *hearers* of the new message seem to have been a mixed group of (at least some) Jews together with a majority of

1. The association of Mark’s Gospel with Rome goes back to the second century CE, when some Christians began to associate its author with Peter: Mark served as Peter’s *hermēneutēs* (‘interpreter’), writing down the apostle’s recollections before his martyrdom there under Nero (thus Papias *apud* Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39,14–16; cf. 1 Peter 5.13, where ‘Babylon’ codes for ‘Rome’). More recently, S. G. F. Brandon has speculated about Titus’ Roman triumph stimulating the evangelist’s imagery, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), pp. 228–9.

non-Jews.<sup>2</sup> This demography might reflect in turn the mixed populations of Jews together with sympathetic pagans to be found within synagogue communities in the Diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

But the recipients of Paul's letters were pagans with a difference: they were 'ex-pagan' pagans. That is to say that, as a condition of their joining this new movement, these pagans had to repudiate the worship of their own gods and to make a commitment to the exclusive worship of Israel's god.<sup>4</sup> I assume that this deity was familiar to them even before their contact with the apostle. Paul's constant reference to Septuagintal terms and to biblical themes and personages inclines me to think that these pagans, well before any contact with the new messianic movement, would have frequented diaspora synagogues. 'Adam', 'Abraham', 'David', 'Jerusalem', 'Law', 'Messiah', not to mention Paul's regular evocation of *ho theos*, 'the god', that is, the god of Israel – these terms must have meant something to them already, or Paul could not have used them so freely as the building-blocks of his particular message. Such familiarity as these people would have had with Jewish concepts, traditions and personages would most likely have come orally, from hearing Jewish writings read in Greek during community gatherings, aka 'the synagogue.'

What, then, did they hear? Which Jewish scriptures were read in community? Passages from the first five books of Moses, also known as 'the Law', surely (cf. Acts 15.21), and passages from 'the prophets,' from the Writings, at least Psalms.<sup>5</sup> If we can infer anything from the frequency of Paul's own citations, as

2. The *ekklesia* in Thessalonica is pagan; ethnicity in the Corinthian community seems to have been mixed (unless the 'ones who are circumcised' are proselytes, 1 Cor. 7.18). Galatians attests to the mixed community in Antioch (2.11–14), though the communities addressed by the epistle are obviously not Jewish (since they were considering circumcision: Jewish men presumably would no longer have had the option; the same argument obtains for Philippians, cf. 3.2–3). The ethnic make-up of the Roman communities seems to have been mixed, though Paul addresses the letter specifically to the *ethnē* there, 1.5–6, though cf. 16 passim.

3. On the presence of non-Jews in diaspora synagogues, well attested in literary and in epigraphical evidence, see, e.g., Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman, 3 vols. in 4 (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1979–87), Vol. 3.1: pp. 1–176; specifically on how this ethnographic fact affected Paul's mission, Paula Fredriksen, 'Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel', *NTS* 56 (2010), pp. 232–52.

4. On the traditions regarding Gentiles turning to Israel's god in the final days, Paula Fredriksen, 'Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2', *JTS* 42 (1991), pp. 532–64; Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007). That Paul (and other apostles to Gentiles) made this demand of their pagan hearers gives us the measure of the early Jesus movement's apocalyptic timeframe, when Gentiles-in-Christ were to act as 'eschatological' Gentiles.

5. On synagogues as a type of 'ethnic reading house', Francis M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 13.

well as from a similar distribution of texts that survive from the first-century Judaean library at Qumran, Isaiah in particular would have loomed large.<sup>6</sup> Both Isaiah and Psalms would go on to have a long future in later, specifically Christian scriptures, each source quarried for details to fill in particularly the edges of Jesus' 'biography', the evangelical birth narratives to the one side, and their death narratives – the passion and resurrection stories – to the other. However, I would like to consider these texts from a slightly different angle: How does the LXX in general, and Isaiah in particular, shape our very *earliest* traditions about Jesus' status specifically as 'Messiah'?

We turn again to Paul. As is well known, Paul frequently refers to Jesus as 'Christ', using 'Christos' by itself to indicate Jesus some 150 times in his undisputed letters. As Matthew Novenson has lately demonstrated, the term works not simply as a 'name', as earlier generations of scholars have argued; instead, 'Christ' serves specifically as an honorific, 'a word that can function as a stand-in for a personal name but part of whose function is to retain its supernatural associations.'<sup>7</sup> In other words, 'Christ' functions similarly to 'Your honour', 'Her Highness', and so on.

As will the later evangelists, Paul backlights the few details he has of Jesus' biography with scripture. Occasionally he's only very vague, waving his hand toward the Bible, as at 1 Corinthians 15.3–4: 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; he was buried and was raised on the third day according to the scriptures' and so on. My question is: Why use this term, 'christos', for Jesus at all? How did the title, and the concept, *initially* attach to him? Paul clearly inherited the designation once he was oriented within the *paradosis* of the new movement; and we can only assume that he explained its appropriateness, and its various meanings, when establishing his own communities. But in his seven undisputed letters, we nonetheless get precious little explanation.<sup>8</sup>

One partial exception comes in Paul's final epistle to the Romans. There, Paul speaks of Jesus specifically as the *Davidic* Messiah, once at the letter's opening and once just toward its close. Jesus, says Paul to the Gentile community in Rome, was 'of the seed of David according to the flesh' (1.3). And at his triumphant eschatological return, Paul concludes, Jesus will appear as 'the shoot of Jesse ... who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope' (15.12, citing Isa. 11.10 LXX). Within this letter, Jesus' Davidic status functions as a kind of messianic

6. See especially J. Ross Wagner's careful study, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), and his charts on pp. 342–3 and 349.

7. *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 138. I further think that Paul's use of *kurios* also appeals to this 'royal' aspect of *christos*, and so functions similarly: rulers and social superiors would be addressed as 'Lord,' and the Messiah is a kingly ruler – an association exploited by Mark 12.35–7.

8. This absence of explanation for a long time fuelled the scholarly position that 'Christ' for Paul functioned merely as a 'name', thus without specific messianic content: see Novenson's review (and demolition) of this position in *Christ*, pp. 12–33 and 64–93.

*inclusio*, binding the epistle's opening lines in chapter 1 to its finale in chapter 15. In short, Paul explicitly links Jesus' Davidic status – a function of fleshly, thus family lineage – to a specifically *post-crucifixion* phenomenon, the *Gentile* mission. This in turn raises the question: To what degree is this ascription of messianic status to Jesus of Nazareth itself a post-crucifixion phenomenon?<sup>9</sup>

Paul's linkage in Romans between a final, Davidic Messiah (Rom. 1), the turning of the nations to Israel's god (Rom. 15), and Jesus' impending *parousia* gives us a fairly precise measure of Paul's own apocalyptic convictions, mid-century; and we'll look at these shortly. But Paul's declaration points us *away* from two things that we know (or at least that I think that we know) about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, some twenty-five to thirty years before Paul composed this letter. These are, first, that Jesus himself seems *not* to have claimed, in any straightforward way, to be 'the' Messiah, Davidic or otherwise; and, second, that Jesus himself did *not* take his message to Gentiles. Let me briefly discuss these assertions in turn.

Did Jesus himself ever claim to be the 'Messiah'? (Did Brian? His mum was not impressed.)



'He's not the Messiah. He's a very naughty boy!'

Each of the evangelists works to portray Jesus in this way, but the vigorous differences in their respective presentations seem to me to undermine their overall efforts. If the historical Jesus had indeed ever claimed to be Messiah, messianic traditions about him should have been more unified, more uniform, or more straightforward: instead, what we find is creative variety. So too with the very bulk

9. On this question, see especially Nils Alstrup Dahl's classic essay, 'The Crucified Messiah,' in id. *Jesus the Christ. The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine* (edited by Donald H. Juel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991; orig. pub. 1960), pp. 27–48.

and the vast variety of *scholarly* arguments affirming that Jesus claimed messianic status for himself. (Since the publication of Ed Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism* in 1985, the so-called scene at the Temple is often pressed into service on and at this point, arguments often asserting that flipping over Temple tables at least implicitly equates to or announces a messianic claim.<sup>10</sup>) In brief, I think, not only would Gospel traditions about Jesus' proclaiming himself Messiah during his mission have been less various and ambivalent,<sup>11</sup> but also scholarly wit and creativity perforce less exercised, had Jesus himself during his lifetime proclaimed his own messianic identity.

Yet *someone* during Jesus' lifetime must have thought that he had made such a claim, or Jesus would not have died in the way that he did. The most unambiguously 'messianic' aspect of Jesus' life, in brief, is his death, crucified by Rome as 'King of the Jews'. In the actual historical context of that particular Passover, Roman concerns about sedition must have shaped events.

Still, the Gospels' narrative trajectories leading up to that final event fail by and large to explain it. Jesus' teachings, his healings and exorcisms, his arguments about Jewish tradition with his contemporary co-religionists, even his announcing the impending arrival of God's kingdom: No amount of intra-Jewish religious wrangling can adequately explain Jesus' very politically charged, Roman death. And further (as I have argued elsewhere), the solitary nature Jesus' death, Rome's failure or lack of interest in inflicting similar treatment on Jesus' closest followers, complicates our picture in interesting ways. Though Jesus was executed as a political insurrectionist, none of his close followers was. How worried about sedition, then, could Pilate actually have been?<sup>12</sup>

Jesus' public messianic profile in his own lifetime is thus, at best, obscure. How then, whether before or very shortly after his death, did Jesus end up proclaimed not only as Messiah, but specifically as David's descendant? Paul in Romans asserts Jesus' Davidic lineage, as we have seen; but he makes no argument for it. Like Mark and like John, Paul seems unaware of the sort of birth stories that we find in

10. For a review of this position, which represents a surprising consensus, see Paula Fredriksen, 'What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus,' *Theology Today* 52 (1995), pp. 75-97, surveying the work of Richard Horsley, Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, N. T. Wright, and E. P. Sanders. John P. Meier hints that his fifth and final volume of *A Marginal Jew* will also make this association between the scene at the Temple and an [at least implicit] messianic claim on Jesus' part: see, e.g., *A Marginal Jew* 3 (New York: Anchor/Yale University Press, 2001), p. 618; see too, most recently, Dale Allison, *Constructing Jesus* (London: Baker Academic, 2010), pp. 236-8. For the argument that Jesus' overturning the Temple court's tables is a post-destruction story, Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 225-34.

11. For a review of the variety of these traditions, see Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ. The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

12. Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 9 and passim; cf. Justin Meggitt, 'The Madness of King Jesus,' *JSNT* 29.4 (2007), pp. 379-413, who argues that Jesus' solitary death is best explained on the theory that Pilate thought that Jesus was insane.

Matthew and in Luke. Those stories – each in its own way – manage to square the circle of having someone known to have come from Nazareth being born in the correct Davidic village of Bethlehem.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Mark and John seem at pains to insist on Jesus' *independence* from Davidic tradition. Undomesticated by a preceding Bethlehem birth narrative, Mark 12.35–37 even seems testily *anti-Davidic*. Mark's mysterious Son of Man truly is the Messiah, we have learned from Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (8.30), and we will learn again from the high priest, and from Jesus himself, in the Markan trial scene (14.61–62).<sup>14</sup> But in the days before Passover, wittily besting all comers in the Temple precincts, Mark's Jesus seems to disavow any necessary connection between being the Messiah and having Davidic lineage: 'How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?' On the contrary, this passage continues: David himself acknowledges the Messiah as his superior.

John the Evangelist's outsized superhero seems even more independent of Davidic legitimation. John's Jesus hails not from the little town of Bethlehem, but from Above, in the Beginning, with God the Father (John 1.1–4). To think of Jesus as descended from David according to the flesh, implies the fourth evangelist, is to think too small. His characters 'know' that Jesus is from the North, and when some identify Jesus as Christ, others ask, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?' (7.41–42). It's a question that the evangelist never again raises: Christologically, he's frying much bigger fish.<sup>15</sup>

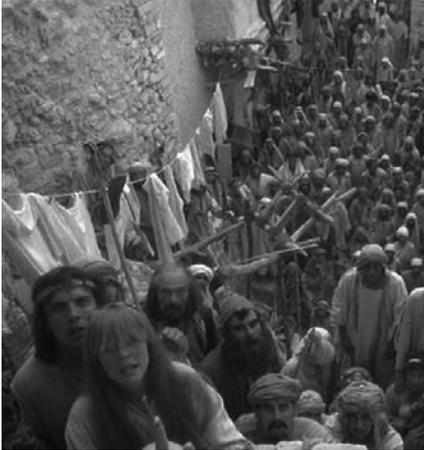
Matthew, by contrast, creates a smoother messianic story. As he weaves his opening narrative, Matthew cites scripture ostentatiously, leaving his reader in no doubt as to the authority of his sources, and of the long biblical prequel to his hero's life. Time and again Matthew demonstrates how scripture had foretold Jesus' coming by constructing narrative episodes from biblical testimonies. 'All this took place in order to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet . . .' Sometimes

13. Thus in Matthew, Joseph and Mary both live in Bethlehem; because of Herod's impending massacre of the innocents, they then flee with baby Jesus to Egypt; then, after Herod's death, they return but settle in Nazareth: we have reviewed these details above. Luke, by contrast, situates Mary and Joseph in the Galilee in Nazareth; they travel to Bethlehem on account of a Roman census – just in time for the birth – and then go back home to Nazareth.

14. Neither 'messianic confession' is prepared for in Mark's narrative: Jesus says nothing about his status as Messiah throughout, until he concurs with the high priest's (spontaneous?) identification, 14.62. Scholars have labelled this stylistic reticence of Mark's the 'Messianic Secret'.

15. 'Messiah' see-saws back and forth with 'prophet' as designations for Jesus in the Gospel of John. 'He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' asks the Samaritan woman (John 4.29 NRSV). 'Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?' asks a crowd in Jerusalem (John 7.26). Later, some in the crowd pronounce, 'This really is the Prophet', while others claim, 'This is the Messiah' (John 7.40–1). The evangelist prefers the much more elevated title of 'divine Son'.

Matthew uses a non-messianic biblical passage to create an episode in Jesus' life, while the evangelical episode in turn transforms the ancient LXX passage, such as the pregnant 'virgin' of Greek Isaiah 7.14, into a messianic prophecy.<sup>16</sup> Mandy would have understood:



'Are you a virgin?'

'Well, if it's not a personal question, are you a virgin?'



'I beg your pardon?'

'If it's not a personal question?! How much more personal can you get? Now, piss off!'

We see this sort of double-feedback loop in Matthew's invention of Jesus' childhood 'flight to Egypt' (2.13–15). This is a small piece of the much larger Rube Goldberg of Matthew's nativity story. In Matthew, Joseph and Mary's hometown is Bethlehem; and Matthew opens his book by tracing Jesus' genealogy from Abraham through David to Joseph, himself a 'son of David' (1.18). An angel then effectively vitiates Matthew's genealogical work by letting Joseph know that Mary will give birth even though she is a *parthenos*, a 'virgin', the LXX's rendering of the Hebrew *almah* at Isaiah 7.14. (If Mary's a virgin, then it makes no difference whom Joseph is related to.)

No matter. A bigger problem looms: how will Matthew get his hero from Bethlehem – the messianically correct birthplace – to Nazareth, whence Jesus was known to have come? An angel moves the plot along, warning Joseph of Herod's

16. M. David Litwa explores the ways in which the claim of a god's 'special' birth is a piece of a common ancient Mediterranean vernacular of deification in *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), pp. 37–67.

plan to slaughter Bethlehem's male children. Off goes the holy family to Egypt. They move back north, this time to Nazareth, only once Herod is safely dead. Their return enables Matthew to mobilize Hosea 11.1, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.' The 'son' in question, in the original context of Hosea, refers to the people of Israel, escaping Egypt in the Exodus: for Matthew, the 'son' is Jesus. So similarly with Isaiah 7.14: the 'son' in the original Hebrew context, the child of a 'young girl', provides an odd way for the prophet to measure time for King Ahaz. For Matthew, reading Greek, the son of a 'virgin' serves as a way to frame Jesus miraculous birth as *emmanu-el*, 'God with us'. Neither scriptural passage, Hosea or Isaiah, refers to a Messiah. Each becomes a messianic prophecy only through the narrative alchemy of Matthew's birth story.

Paul knows none of this. His *christos* is 'born of woman' (*ek gunaikos*, Gal. 4.4), not of a virgin. And as with the figure in John's Gospel, so too with Paul's: the Pauline 'Christ Jesus' originates from a neighbourhood much more elevated than Bethlehem. Paul's Jesus seems to originate 'up there,' being originally 'in the form of [a] god' (no article: *morphos theou*, not *morphos tou theou*)<sup>17</sup> but not grasping at 'equivalence with [a] god' (again, no article). This being then takes on 'the form of a slave,' 'the likeness of men' (Phil. 2.5–7), and he is exalted by God (*ho theos*) on account of his humble and obedient crucifixion. Jesus seems here to function as a type of divine mediator. It's a high status, but it does not qualify him in any particular way to be considered a Davidic Messiah. Why then, and how, did Paul make this identification?

Let's go back to the Davidic framing of Romans chapters 1 and 15. Romans 1.3–4 seems to draw a distinction between Jesus as the Davidic Messiah and Jesus as divine Son. The RSV reads:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the Gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus is 'Messiah' is by fleshly descent, but declared or made known as 'divine son' by virtue of his resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

I think that there are several problems with this translation and interpretation. One is that 'son of God' is also a messianic designation, and indicates a human being, albeit a royal human being: 2 Samuel 7, and Psalm 2, are two prime scriptural attestations of this idea. But the other problem is the way to read Paul's statement, *ex anastaseōs nekron*, which will come into Latin as *ex resurrectione mortuorum*. The RSV translation, focused as it is on Jesus' own resurrection, seems refracted through the prism of much later church councils.

17. The Greek is miserable to translate, because English can't mark the distinction that the absence of the article gives the Greek. The RSV's capitalization, 'in the form of God', is a post-Nicene piety. In a moment of inspired desperation, Larry Hurtado, in conversation, has suggested 'Jesus' god-ishness' as a plausible rendering. I thank him for his suggestion.

18. This idea fuels the argument in Bart Ehrman's most recent book, *How Jesus Became God* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), see especially pp. 211–30.

The problem of course, is our missing preposition: 'From the dead' requires an *ek* before *nekrōn*; and indeed, a preposition is what we find in those other New Testament passages when an individual resurrection is referred to.<sup>19</sup> Thus Paul's Greek here does not say, 'by [Jesus'] resurrection *from* the dead' but rather 'by *the* resurrection *of* the dead'. Paul evidently has the communal, End-time event in view – the meaning that Augustine caught in his commentary on Romans, translating this sentence as 'designated Son of God in power . . . by the resurrection *of* the dead'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Romans 1.4 aligns not so much with (for example) Philippians 2 and other passages about divine exaltation; rather, it coheres with (for example) 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 when, at Jesus' second coming, the dead will rise. It is Jesus' role in effecting the End-time *general* resurrection that will announce publicly his powerful status as God's son, that is, as the (Davidic) Messiah.<sup>21</sup>

Paul ties this eschatological event in with another: the End-time turning of the nations to the god of Israel.<sup>22</sup> Here we see the second half of his Davidic messianic inclusio in Romans 15.9–12, the Gentiles' rejoicing with God's people, Israel. Paul weaves a cento from Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah. It was precisely to achieve this

19. Thus, Matthew 14.2 gives *apo ton nekrōn*, referring to rumours of John the Baptist's resurrection from the dead; cf. the parallel at Mark 6.14, *ek nekrōn*. When Paul speaks of his own hope of being raised 'from the dead', he also uses *ek nekrōn*, Phil. 3.11. Acts 17.32 and Hebrews 6.2, on the other hand, when referring to the general resurrection, use *anastasis nekrōn*, 'resurrection of dead [persons]' – exactly the same construction that Paul uses here at Romans 1.4.

20. 'And this same one, who 'according to the flesh was born of the seed of David,' Paul names 'predestined Son of God in power'; not according to the flesh, but 'according to the Spirit'; and not just any spirit, but 'the Spirit of sanctification by the resurrection of the dead'. For in the [general] resurrection appears the power of Christ who died, so that it might be said, 'predestined in power according to the Spirit of sanctification by the resurrection of the dead' (Rom. 1.4); *epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 5.1–2.

21. Jesus already is the divine son (which is the force of the aorist participle *horisthentos*, 'designated,' Latin *praedestinatus*); but he will be manifest as such in power only at his Parousia, which will entail this general resurrection; cf. 1 Thess. 4.16 and 1 Cor. 15.23.

22. Traditions about the fate of Gentiles at the End-time vary, some exclusive (the nations will be destroyed, or will lick the dust at Israel's feet, or be the objects of God's wrath) and some inclusive, e.g., the nations will stream to Jerusalem and worship together with Israel (Isa. 2.2–4//Mic. 4); they will together eat on the Temple mount the feast that God will prepare (Isa. 25.6); Gentiles will accompany Jews at the Ingathering (Zech. 8.23); they will themselves carry exiles back to Jerusalem (Ps. Sol. 7.31–41). At the End, these Gentiles will bury their idols and direct their sight to uprightness (1 Enoch 91.14); many nations will come from afar to the name of the Lord God, bearing gifts (Tobit 13.11); after the Temple is rebuilt, all the nations will turn in fear to the Lord, and bury their idols (Tobit 14.5–6); at the coming of the Great King, the nations will bend knee to God (Sib. Or. 3.616), they will go to the Temple and renounce their idols (3.715–24), and they will come from every land bringing incense and gifts to the Temple of the great god (3.772). See further James M. Scott, *Paul and the Nations* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), pp. 119–21 for texts from Qumran.

redemption, Paul says, that Christ came: 'For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the circumcision [that is, of the Jews] on account of God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy' (15.8). For Paul, the success of the mission to the Gentiles, mid-century, indexes Jesus' status as God's son, the Davidic Messiah and 'shoot of Jesse' (Isa. 11.10).<sup>23</sup> The coming general resurrection will declare his messianic status as this son of God *in power* (1.4).

Whence this Pauline idea linking the Gentile mission to Jesus' messianic identity? *Not* from Jesus of Nazareth. According to the synoptic Gospels, Jesus spent most of his teaching time in the Jewish villages of the Galilee; according to John, Jesus taught mostly in Jerusalem. Non-Jews were most likely and most often rather thin on the ground in either location; and Jesus, like his mentor John the Baptist, seems to have concentrated on taking the message of God's impending kingdom mostly to fellow Jews. Matthew's Jesus even instructs his disciples *not* to speak to anyone else: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles' (10.5). In all these Gospel stories, the Gentile mission is pushed off to the period *after* the crucifixion: for Luke, indeed, such a mission gets underway only half-way through volume 2, in the Acts of the Apostles. In Jesus' lifetime there was no 'Gentile mission' as such.

The information in Paul's letters that we have about the movement after Jesus' death confirms this impression: only once the mission that formed around Jesus' memory and message moved out from Jerusalem into mixed cities such as Caesarea, and into the network of synagogue communities in the Diaspora, did it begin to attract not only other Jews but also, and in numbers, interested pagans as well.<sup>24</sup> Surprised by its own successes, the early *ekklesia* seems to have incorporated these people as ex-pagan pagans: not required to convert to Judaism, they nonetheless had to stop worshipping idols and to commit to the sole worship of Israel's god. And by mid-century – as Galatians in particular evinces – its success among pagans was actually fracturing the movement. No one, faced with this evidently unanticipated situation, knew quite what to do.<sup>25</sup>

The arguments internal to the movement caused by its successes among Gentiles, its conflicting 'policy' decisions and its various social improvisations, in other words, make the same point that the Gospels articulate through their narratives: Jesus himself left no teachings on the matter. And yet, from what we can tell, the early post-crucifixion movement also readily accommodated Gentiles, incorporating these people into their communities, thus 'into' Christ. Why?

23. See Wagner, *Heralds*, pp. 219–305 (Rom. 11) and 307–40 (Rom. 15).

24. On the socially destabilizing consequences of this movement's spreading to Gentiles, and the ways that this destabilizing accounts both for Paul's experience as both persecutor and persecuted, see Paula Fredriksen, 'Paul, Practical Pluralism, and the Invention of Religious Persecution in Roman Antiquity', in Peter C. Phan and Jonathan Ray (eds), *Understanding Religious Pluralism: Perspectives from Religious Studies and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), pp. 87–113.

25. Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 20–40, reviews this moment of the movement within the context of the complex religious ecosystem of Graeco-Roman cities.

Here we must consider the larger context of the Jesus movement: Jewish restoration theology. Apocalyptic eschatology is a big and baggy tradition, expressing any number of expectations, predictions and themes: Celestial and terrestrial catastrophes – earthquakes, plagues, falling stars, darkness at noon. A final battle between Good and Evil, the forces of Good led by God himself, or perhaps by a commanding angel, or perhaps by an anointed king. The punishment or destruction of the wicked, who will be the objects of divine wrath: foreign kings, fornicating idol worshippers and apostate Jews, especially those whose views differ from those of the prophetic writer's. The resurrection of the dead, a final judgment and the vindication of the righteous: it's all coming soon. Exiles return to the Land, the tribes are gathered in; they convene at a new or renewed Temple, in Jerusalem. *When* will these things happen? At the approaching End of the Age. *How* can you know what time it is on God's clock? By attending to heavily symbolic, apocalyptic prophecies, thus decoding the signs of the times. The Pythons understood this well:



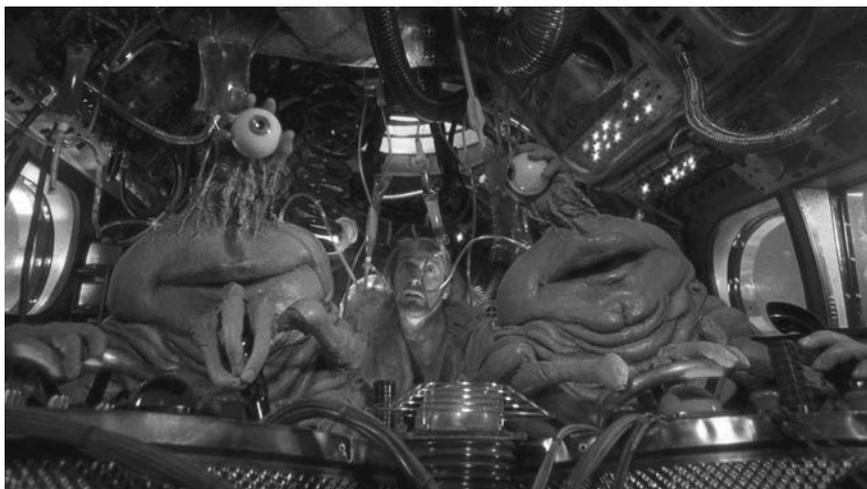
'For the demon shall bear a nine-bladed sword. Nine-bladed! Not two or five or seven, but nine, which he will wield on all wretched sinners, sinners just like you, sir, there, and the horns shall be on the head, with which he will . . .'

What happens to non-Jews in these Jewish traditions about the Jewish god establishing his kingdom? It depends. Some prophecies are negative, condemning and exclusive: Gentiles are defeated by the forces of good; they are subject to Israel; they lick the dust at Israel's feet. But other prophecies are positive, affirming and inclusive. As an eschatological miracle, at the End of Days, the Gentile nations will destroy their idols, renounce the worship of their native gods, and join with Israel in God's kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

26. See above, n. 22.

Paul, just like his prime biblical source, the LXX's Isaiah, expresses both types of prophecies about Gentiles, the negative ones and the positive ones. In his letters, he warns his readers about the fast-approach Day of the Lord and the Coming Wrath (1 Cor. 1.81; 3.13; 2; 1 Cor. 5.5; 2 Cor. 1.14; Phil. 1.6, 10; 2.16; 1 Thess. 5.2; 2 Thess. 2.2) and also he speaks about the incorporation of Gentiles into the Kingdom – provided that they foreswear their gods (1 Thess. 1.9; Gal. 3.29). How many Gentiles? In some places, he says all of those Gentiles who listen to him. But in his final letter, Romans, he seems to think in terms of bigger numbers: when Christ returns to Zion in glory – an event that Paul expects to live to see – then the *pleroma* of the Gentiles, their 'fullness' or 'full number' will 'come in,' that is, will be saved (11.25).<sup>27</sup>

At that moment not only will these penitent pagans acknowledge Christ and the god whom he represents: so will the pagans' gods. These are the cosmic supernatural forces and personalities to be defeated by Christ at his second coming. A multiplicity of gods 'lower' than the god of Israel was native to ancient Jewish monotheism: they appear not infrequently in the Bible, often in Psalms.<sup>28</sup> 'The gods of the Gentiles are *daimonia*', lower gods, Paul instructs his Gentiles in Corinth, referring to Psalm 95.5 LXX (1 Cor. 10.20). These superhuman forces dwell in the upper air and in the astral spheres: they are *archai* and *exousiai* and *dunameis* (1 Cor. 15.24; cf. Rom. 8.38, and the heavenly knees of Phil. 2.10). The returning Christ will defeat them, in an apocalyptic battle located in what we would now call outer space – a detail nicely caught by the film:



27. On the ways that Paul's phrasing on the 'fullness of the nations and all Israel' recalls the Table of Nations of Genesis 10 and the number of the nations in Deuteronomy 32.8, see especially Scott, *Nations*, pp. 121–49.

28. On the normative polytheism of ancient 'monotheism', see Paula Fredriksen, 'Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins whose Time Has Come to Go', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35 (2006), pp. 231–46.

Like their humans, these gods – whether above the earth or below the earth or upon the earth, says Paul in Philippians (2.10), will also at the End of Days acknowledge God and his Messiah.

Allow me to conclude by summing up, this time in historically chronological order, the various points that we have surveyed during our tour through the Jewish Bible, early Christian scriptures, and the invention of tradition. The historical Jesus of Nazareth, a wandering charismatic holy man and an apocalyptic prophet, did not immediately suggest or support traditional ideas of the expected, End-time Davidic Messiah. Presumably his immediate followers knew this. If Mark 12.35–37 preserves an authentic historical reminiscence, Jesus seems to have known this himself. Whether he accepted a messianic designation assigned by other contemporaries is unclear, and the Gospels – their stories of Jesus’ crucifixion to one side – are themselves ambiguous. *Brian* well reflects the issue:



‘Hail, Messiah!’

‘I’m *not* the Messiah! Will you please listen?’

‘I am not the Messiah, do you understand? Honestly!’

‘Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!’

‘What? Well, what sort of chance does that give me?!’

‘All right, I *am* the Messiah!’

‘He is! He is the Messiah!’

‘Now fuck off!’

At some point before Jesus’ arrest and execution, enough of the crowds in Jerusalem acclaimed Jesus the Messiah for Pilate to act swiftly to disabuse them of the idea. And at some point shortly after this execution, some of his followers became convinced that they had seen Jesus again, raised from the dead (1 Cor.

15.3–4). The significance of these resurrection appearances was eschatological. They affirmed Jesus' original prophecy that the Kingdom was coming soon. As Paul, recounting these events some 20 years after their occurrence, states in 1 Corinthians 15.51–52, Jesus' own resurrection indexed the nearness of the general resurrection, thus the nearness of the End.

This affirmation of Jesus' prophecy mobilized his earliest followers to comb through scripture, to try to understand his message in their new, changed circumstances post-resurrection. Jesus *was* the Messiah, they taught; but now, post-resurrection, he would have to come again. Jesus' first coming had not been particularly messianic, and his followers knew this. Constrained, perhaps, from providing Jesus with a messianic past, these earliest followers instead gave him a messianic future. Leading bands of angels, descending from clouds of glory to the sound of celestial trumpets, defeating evil cosmic forces, raising the dead, and even – especially in Paul's view – turning the nations to the worship of Israel's god: when Jesus came for the second time, said his earliest followers, he was coming the way that a Davidic Messiah *should* come. And he was coming soon.<sup>29</sup>

But Time, of course, did *not* end on time. What we think of as 'Christianity' succeeded precisely as its foundational prophecy failed. And the generations that followed the movement's first generation – which had been convinced that it was history's *last* generation – adopted and adapted to their new circumstances by turning once again to biblical tradition. It was they who now provided Jesus with a messianic past. In the New Testament canon we can trace how Pauline *kerygma* yields to evangelical life story, with the Jewish Bible, in Greek, generating Jesus' new biographical details. A virgin mother, a Davidic genealogy, a birthplace in Bethlehem, a scrum of wise men and shepherds, a star arising from Judah: the tradition was invented, the tropes secured. And the story, finally, can begin.



29. On these apocalyptic pronouncements both in Paul and in the Gospels, Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 78–89; specifically on Jesus as Messiah, pp. 119–54.

