THE HISTORICAL JESUS PUZZLE

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In this paper I shall address three main questions: Why ask about the historical Jesus? What new data do we have to warrant more research? and What, if any, findings can we identify in current research?[1]

1. Why ask about the historical Jesus?

The first is a serious question. Why enquire about the historical Jesus? One might counter: Why not? There are many reasons why some would consider the pursuit as only marginally relevant if not useless. From the perspective of Christian faith, is it not a living Jesus who concerns us? Does concern with the historical Jesus not reflect a failure to take resurrection faith seriously? Others might point to the message of Christ's death for us on the cross and his resurrection as the core of the Christian message. What more can detailed information about Jesus' life offer

[1] There are a number of very useful reviews of current Jesus scholarship. Among the most recent I include the following: M. J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1994); J. Carlson, and R. A. Ludwig (eds) *Jesus and Faith. A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan author of* The Historical Jesus (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994); R. Crotty, *The Jesus Question. The Historical Search* (Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollins*Religious*, 1996); L. T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus. the Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*(San Francisco: Harper, 1996); B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995); N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God Vol 2. Jesus and the Victory of God.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 3-124.

us?[2] Is Paul not an impressive example of someone who could set forth the heart of the Christian message without apparently having much knowledge of the early ministry of Jesus and, at least in his letters, showing next to no interest in such detail? From a literary point of view we might argue that the attempt to use gospel texts as windows through which to imagine that we can peer across 30-50 years to the historical Jesus is to misuse the texts. They are their own reality and in themselves contain a world where we meet our Jesus, the Jesus of faith.[3]

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[2] In his critical review of recent research, Johnson, *Real Jesus*, writes: "But looking at the 'story of Jesus' not in terms of a collection of facts or in terms of a pile of discreet pieces, but in terms of *pattern* and *meaning*, we found a deep consistency in the earliest Christian literature concerning the character of Jesus as Messiah" (p. 165). "If the expression *the real Jesus* is used at all, it should not refer to a historically reconstructed Jesus. Such a Jesus is not 'real' in any sense, except as a product of scholarlyt imagination. The Christian's claim to experience the 'real Jesus' in the present, on the basis of religious experience and conviction, can be challenged on a number of fronts (religious, theological, moral), but not historically" (p. 167). J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol 1. The Roots of the Problerm and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), expresses himself similarly, "What, then, - ask the objectors - is the usefulness of the historical Jesus to people of faith? My reply is: none, if one is asking solely about the direct object of Christian faith: Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and presently reigning in his Church. This presently reigning Lord is accessible to all believers, including all those who will never study history or theology for even s single day in their lives. Yet I maintain that the quest for the historical Jesus can be very useful if one is asking about faith seeking understanding, i.e., theology, in a contemporary context" (p. 198). Meier is strongly committed to the critical role which historical research may play for theology, not least because theology, itself, "is a cultural artifact" (p. 198). He sees such historical research serving the interest of faith in resisting attempts "to reduce faith in Christ to a content-less cipher, a mythic symbol, or a timeless archetype .. to swallow up the real humanity of Jesus into an 'orthodox' emphasis on his divinity .. to 'domesticate' Jesus for a comfortable, respectable, bourgeois Christianity" and to have Jesus "easily coopted for programs of political revolution" (p. 199). One of the strongest cases for the relationship between the historical Jesus and the faith of the Church is in the work of John Knox who emphasised the foundation of faith in the impression created by the event of the historical Jesus preserved in the Church's gospels. See J. Knox, *Jesus Lord and Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) and also an application of this approach in P. Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

[3] This is the argument of Crotty, *Jesus Question.* See also my review of this work:in *Colloquium* 29.1 (1997), pp. 69-72.

Behind such responses are serious theological issues which have dogged attempts to pursue the historical questions. Martin Kähler was one of the first to expose the fragility of faith founded on the historical enterprise.[4] It found its echo in Bultmann, who faced with realism (and today we would say with the pessimism characteristic of the early part of the century) the attempt to recover the words and deeds of the historical Jesus.[5] Schweitzer, in early post modernist mode, had exposed the fallibility of nineteenth century lives of Jesus.[6] The issues he raised about the propensity of authors to fashion Jesus according to the presuppositions of their age are just as pertinent at this end of the century.

Sectional interests are as much likely to fashion their Jesus as a warrant for their own ideology as they were then, some with more, some with less sophistication. Jesus is a likely candidate where people seek an authoritative basis for their views. Christians of all kinds will want to find justification in Jesus for cherished values. Sometimes this will be as part of a serious attempt to counter other moods and movements within Christianity. The "brokerless kingdom" which Crossan sees at the heart of Jesus' message stands in contrast to the brokering institutional authority which the Church has become for many.[7] The Jesus Seminar set itself up deliberately to offer an alternative to the fundamentalism and fundamentalist portraits of Jesus in American society.[8] It has been long popular to play off Jesus against Paul, usually

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4 M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964; originally published in German: *Der sogenante historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische* Christus, 1892).

5 R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the* Word, (London: Collins, 1958; first published in German, 1926);*The Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols(London: SCM, 1952, 1955 first published in German, 1948-1953) esp. 3-32.

6 A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: A & C Black, 3rd edn., 1954; German original published in 1906).

7 J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). Crossan believes Jesus offered the "brokerless" kingdom, that is, access to God without intermediaries, was radically egalitarian, and trying to change society accordingly through the villages.

8 Robert W. Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar, and co-chair with J. D. Crossan, called scholars together in 1985 to participate in an ongoing Jesus Seminar. Around 200 have participated, with about 40 ongoing. They discuss, then vote with beads on historicity (red-yes; pink-maybe; grey: probably not; black: no). Not much of Mark survives; Lord's Prayer goes; mostly sayings surviving in the Q-Thomas tradition are left reflecting particular presuppositions about eschatology and about Q and Thomas. See also R. W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus. Jesus for a New Millenium* (Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder Headline, 1996).

on the basis of false assumptions about Paul, often as the creator of atonement theory. An Australian variant is the extraordinary enterprise upon which Barbara Thiering has embarked in developing a new Jesus story borne of speculation about Qumran connections and secret gospel codes.[9] Its appeal is that it offers an alternative image of Jesus to the established church view which many find so alienating.

Growing appreciation of the complexity of the gospel traditions and their development has led to attempts favour one or the other early stream, if not to side with the historical Jesus against all or much of what emerged in the development of christology. Burton Mack has isolated the lost gospel of Q, giving prior weighting to its earliest sapiential layer (according to Kloppenborg's analysis) and its close relative, Thomas, and disenfranchising Mark as an imaginative construction.[10] The

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[9] Her theories first appeared in *Redating the Teacher of Righteousness* and *The gospels and Qumran: a new hypothesis* and *The Qumran origins of the Christian church,* published in 1979, 1981 and 1983 respectively in the ANZSTS/Colloquium monograph series, Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology andReligion, in Sydney. She developed her approach further in *Jesus the Man. A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992), and it keeps being extended as she has been applying her so-called pesher approach to New Testament writings. See most recently her *Jesus of the Apocalypse* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1994). Her approach entails the belief that just as the Dead Sea Scroll writers saw their own history predicted in Old Testament texts, so they wrote the New Testament writings to refer to their story (that is a very big assumption). It allows Thiering to create a Tolkien like world of John the Baptist, Jesus and his followers, which includes Jesus' life after the so-called death, subsequent marriage, travels and so on. Apart from the methodological assumption, the other major weakness is the dating of the scrolls which on the latest carbon dating and religio-social research best fits in the period beginning two hundred years earlier. Thiering's work appeals (to the media and the public), because it offers an alternative view of Jesus to the traditional church picture. Despite a complete absence of scholarly agreement, her work goes on.

[10] B. L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel. The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). See also his *A Myth of Innocence. Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) and *Who wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). For Kloppenborg's influential analysis see J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q. Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Mack dismisses Mark as a rationalisation by Mark of Christian failure. Q (its earliest sapiential/ wisdom saying layer) and Thomas tell us Jesus was a Cynic type sage, challenging the establishment, not interested in eschatology nor in Jewish Law and history. Mack has done useful work on the form of the early traditions, but his historical reconstruction is extreme. It assumes that a community of early Q (pre- or even non Christian) read only one source. Mack, Crossan, Borg and those dismissing the relevance of future eschatology

Jesus Seminar has decided for a non eschatological Jesus who emerges as a more comfortable stirrer in an age of stirring and questioning established structures.

Pulpits and pressure groups have witnessed a wide range of Jesus figures. More than once I remember hearing Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 held up as modelling the counselling interview: Jesus, the counsellor (an absurdity at many levels). More recently there have been serious appeals to Jesus as a liberation theologian, feminist, radical egalitarian, liberal humanist, champion of social justice. There is some justification for each of these, although it is anachronistic to impose on Jesus the sophisticated social analysis which they presuppose. The temptation is then for these pieties to cover over the huge gaps and explain away the silences to preserve a Jesus who could make it with the sophisticated ideologs of the movement. This is a form of docetism which too often fails to let Jesus be a first century human being. It is no better than more traditional efforts to find the chalcedonian Christ on the streets of Capernaum in some literal sense.

It would be easy for any or all of the above reasons to abandon the search. In response to Bultmann Käsemann reasserted the legitimacy of the historical question in 1953, but did so, fully in touch with the extraordinary historical difficulties and potential self deception for faith.[11] There is value in examining the connection between the historical Jesus and what subsequently emerged. Some things are unlikely to be invented, like Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Käsemann's first tentative use of the criterion of dissimilarity which identified what appeared distinctive of Jesus prised open the door. As a principle applied more generally it had severe limitations; identifying what is distinctive is far from identifying what is characteristic about a person.[12] The important thing was that, at least in circles convinced of the rigours of Bultmann's method, the cautious reconstructions recommenced.

At a broader theological level, people were also acknowledging that faith cannot be satisfied with making historical claims and then surrendering them to uncertainty.

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face difficulties: how to explain the close link with John the Baptist and the many Christian traditions (including Paul) who clearly espoused a future eschatology. Answer: Jesus and John fell out or Jesus changed his mind after John's arrest - who is writing fiction now? Even harder to explain is the transition to the Church. Answer: diverse Christianities, of which only Q/Thom retains the original emphasis.

[11] E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964) 23-65.

[12] On this see the useful discussion in Meier, *Marginal Jew*, Vol 1, 168-174.

It became a matter of how much is claimed. For Bultmann the simple fact of the Christ event, that God acted, sufficed. Paul needed little more. But such a stance crumbled on a number of sides. Paul's understanding of the cross event, especially as a model of vicarious suffering, faces major hurdles. Sometimes one could get the impression that Jesus himself was only a saviour once he died and was raised. It has become increasingly clear that this was not a view shared by gospel writers. At least the year or so of Jesus' ministry was to be seen as a momentous event. John's gospel fitted Bultmann's model best, since it consists of variations on the theme that in Christ God encountered us, but this was still bound up with a christology of pre-existence which many (including the other evangelists) did not share.[13]

Substance mattered as much as honorific titles. There had to be content to the Christ event beyond the mere fact of its happening. Early forms of this development focused on Christ as the suffering servant.[14] It was not just the dying for our sins, but the particular attitude towards suffering and towards life which preceded it. Studies of the kingdom of God as Jesus' message produced too often a history which stalled at Easter, after which the proclaimer became the proclaimed.[15] Luke's version of what early preachers might have proclaimed indicates that this was only half true. Easter meant the vindication of Jesus' message which therefore remained the central content of the message. In particular many features of the early church, whether reconstructed on the basis of gospel or pauline traditions, revealed a continuity between pre-Easter and post-Easter expectations which made sense against the background of eschatological expectation, in particular: resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, (meals, baptism) and the continuing expectations of God's imminent intervention.[16] The reconstruction of the earliest community beliefs also pressed

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[13] Bultmann, *Theology*, Vol 2, esp. 59-69. For discussion of Bultmann's demythologising interpretation of John which argued that the evangelist also treated pre-existence as a metaphor, see W. Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie 23, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2nd edn., 1992) 1-7; J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 44-66.

[14] For instance J. Jeremias and W. Zimmerli, Art. "παῖς θεοῦ," TDNT 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; first published in German 1957) 654-717; V. Taylor, *Jesus and his Sacrifice* (London: Macmillan, 1937); T. W. Manson, *The Servant Messiah* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953).

[15] Cf. the major studies by N. Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963); *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967); *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (London: SCM, 1976).

[16] See Bultmann, *Theology* Vol 2, 31-42; J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977).

backward asking about the connection with Jesus and his disciples before Easter. Against the background of such developments it has been inevitable that people have seen research on the historical Jesus as not only demanded by historical inquiry but also desirable in the process of coming to terms with what is an adequate theology.

2. So what is new?

At one level we have to say: very little. The primary sources are still the four gospels. Despite some healthy and vocal dissent (espoused now at a popular level by Selby Spong),[17] there is still a broad consensus that the hypothesis which makes best sense of the relations among the gospels is that Matthew and Luke have independently used Mark as a sources and also another source Q and, beyond that, had their distinctive sources and redactional interests which account for the way the gospels have come down to us. John is seen either as independent of the others or acquainted at some distance, but with some early elements of historical worth now overlaid with creative reworking in symbolic mode which renders much inaccessible.

The new element in gospel research comes partly from continuing research on Q and from the Gospel of Thomas. While many still see the latter as dependent on the Synoptic Gospels,[18] there is an increasing number of scholars who see the Gospel of Thomas as containing at least some traditions which are earlier.[19] This comes at a time when one influential study of Q, that of Kloppenborg, has proposed that the earliest layer of Q consisted of a collection of wisdom sayings, expanded secondarily

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[17] J. S. Spong, *Liberating the Gospel. Reading the Bible with Jerwish Eyes* (SanFrancisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) espouses the view that Luke use both Mark and Matthew, a view argued by M. D. Goulder, *Luke: a new paradigm* JSNTS 20 (Sheffield : JSOTPr., 1989). On this see the critical assessment by M. S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels. An Examination of a New Paradigm* JSNTS133 (Sheffield: JSOTPr., 1996). For as recent restatement of the Griesbach hypothesis according to which Mark abridges Matthew and Luke see A. J. McNicol et al. (ed.) *Beyond the Q impasse : Luke's use of Matthew: a demonstration by the research team of the International Institute for the Renewal of Gospel Studies* (Valley Forge, Pa. : Trinity Press International, 1996).

[18] See the discussion in C. M. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel tradition* Studies in the New Testament and its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986).

[19] H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels. Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990) 84-124. For discussion of the contrasting views see F. T. Fallon and R. Cameron, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 25.6, 4195-4251; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, Vol 1, 123-139.

by material with a stronger eschatological flavour.[20] Kloppenborg himself does not argue that the earlier layer necessarily existed in isolation from other traditions of the kind later introduced into Q,[21] but this has been the conclusion of some scholars, notably Mack.[22] There is a fascinating similarity between the kind of early collection people posit in Thomas and the one believed to be at the basis of the Q tradition. If these are seen as the most authentic traditions and others are discounted as secondarily rationalising myths, a very different kind of Jesus emerges who is only just Jewish and certainly not focused on eschatological hope.

Crossan seeks to grapple with the methodological issues which face the historian in using gospel sources by crediting what are widely held to be later gospels with considerable historical worth. Gospels of Peter, Hebrews, Egyptians, Nazoreans, Ebionites,(Secret) Mark, various fragments, dialogue and apocryphon writings, now stand beside the four canonical writings and Thomas.[23] The matter becomes problematic when all such gospels count more or less equally as sources. Crossan's attempt to make the passion narrative of the Gospel of Peter the source of the passion narratives in the canonical gospels has won little support.[24] It has yet to be demonstrated that these later gospels should be accorded such historical worth.

Beside developments in gospel research and the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, the major event affecting historical research in the field has been the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and, more particularly, their final release for full publication in 1991. The major sectarian documents had already been made public in the 1950's, but it took another 40 years before their full release. Apart from excesses of a few journalists and somewhat extreme speculation about Christian connections on the part of Thiering and Eisenman,[25] the chief impact on the Dead

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20 Kloppenborg, *Formation,* (see n.10 above)

21 Kloppenborg, *Formation*, 244-245.

22 see n.10 above

23 Crossan,*Historical Jesus*, 427-434.

24 J. D. Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); J. D. Crossan, *Who killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). See the critique in R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave*. 2 vols The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1317-1349; see also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 47-52.

25 Most recently R. Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus. Rediscovering the True History of early Christianity. Vol 1 The Cup of the Lord* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). Cf. also his earlier works: R. Eisenman and M. Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (London: Element, 1992) and *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran. a New*

Sea Scrolls has been to transform our understanding of Judaism. It was not just what the Scrolls themselves revealed of a diverse Judaism which freely employed dualism more familiar to us from the language of later gnosticism. They not only alerted us to diversities in understanding Torah, but also led to a rediscovery of the rich sources which Jewish literature of the period offered. As a result there has been an explosion of interest in the apocalypses, testament, histories, legends, midrashic compilations, wisdom collections, and liturgical collections of Judaism. At the same time there has been much increased attention given to the extensive works of Josephus and Philo. This has occurred at a time when in rabbinic studies there has emerged a much more critical assessment of the value of traditions alleged to be early. It has become very complicated to assess the degree to which material now preserved in the Mishnah, Tosefta and Targums, reflects traditions and practices in the period before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Doubtless many do, how do we measure this?[26]

New documents and renewed attention both to the content of and the complex methodological questions posed by the exstant Jewish sources has had the effect of enhancing a sense of diversity within pre-70 CE Judaism. It is no longer meaningful to speak of Jesus just in relation to Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and, perhaps, Zealots, discussions which often came down to Jesus and the Pharisees. Even within Pharisaism there appears to have been considerable diversity. One of the effects of the more differentiated understanding of Judaism and the pervasive nature of Jewishness has been that it has become much more natural to seek to understand Jesus as a Jew and to see Jesus as fitting within the diverse spectrum that was Judaism.

In a socio-religious perspective it is hard to imagine a Jesus who would not have conformed to the broad expectations of Jewish life which included tithing, observance of domestic purity requirements, and the like, without which he would have set him himself up for ostracism and offered his opponents an easy target. Nor are scholars as willing as they once were to speak of Jesus acting against Torah.[27] Scholars like

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Hypothesis of Qumran Origins (Leiden: Brill, 1983); *James the Just in the Habakkuk Pesher (*Leiden: Brill, 1986). On Thiering see n. 9 above.

[26] See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the* Mishnah (London: SCM, 1990) and, in response, J. Neusner, *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. A Systematic Reply to Professor E. P. Sanders.* Studies in the History of Judaism 84(Atlanta: Scholars, 1993). See also E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE - 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992) and B. D. Chilton and J. Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament. Practice and Beliefs* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Sanders make the point convincingly that much of Jesus' teaching makes the Law stricter and that he was not alone in doing so and that other comments should be seen as well within the range of interpretation of the day.[28] Our Jewish sources also offer examples of the kind of emphasis on attitude in relation to sexual behaviour and anger which characterised Jesus' teaching.[29]

The socio-political dimension has also received much attention through the work of scholars like Hengel, Freyne and Horsley.[30] The eschatological focus of much of the Jesus tradition makes good sense in the light of the diverse eschatological expectations of the day, which also sometimes crystallised around individual figures, would-be messiahs or prophets of hope. Some like Borg and Wright have sought to collapse all such eschatological material into religio-political comment on impending dangers facing Israel and soon to become reality in the disaster of 66-70 CE.[31] The first half of Crossan's major work *The Historical Jesus* provides an excellent survey of the socio-political context. In addition he draws attention to the use of generic models from social anthropology, such as the likely structure and dynamics of peasant

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27 cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971) 205-208.

28 Sanders, *Jewish Law*, esp. 1-96; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985)

29 See for instance Test. Reuben 3-6;Test. Issachar 5-7; Test. Dan 2-4; Test. Gad 3-7.

30 M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism.* 2 vols (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; New York: Crossroad, 1981); M. Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990); S. Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), a very useful discussion of the political situation in Galilee, though tending to impose a spiral model of revolution which fits Jesus in at a certain stage. The problem is, as Freyne and others have shown, that Galilee was relatively quiet under Antipas. His most recent work on Galilee , Horsley, R. A. *Galilee : history, politics, people* (Valley Forge : Trinity Press, 1995), argues a continuing Israelite tradition independent of Judea and the Samaritans - rather forced; archaeological evidence does not support the thesis.

31 M. J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); M. J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1994); M. J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); M. J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God.*

economies (though "peasant" seems hardly to fit Jesus and his group, who appear to be a step higher on the scale) and the Mediterranean honour-shame culture. Such models will always require reality testing against the data available.

Archaeology has also made its contribution, not least in confirming the theses of Hengel and others, based on literary sources, that Hellenisation was widespread in Palestine from the third century BCE onwards and certainly made its mark in the large cities of lower Galilee and the neighbouring Decapolis.[32] The rejection of Hellenistic syncretism in the early second century CE associated with the tensions which led to the Maccabean crisis by no means stemmed the tide. The rich and the rulers, including the high priestly rulers, adopted the fashions, even though selectively. Galilee, on a major trade route, would have had some exposure to the ways of the Greeks. Some have drawn parallels between Jesus as popular sage and the popular sages of the Hellenistic Roman world, commonly identified as Cynics, though usually reflecting a mixture of Stoic and Cynic values.[33] It is hard to move from parallels, which Downing has assembled among teachers who appear over a wide time span and across many parts of the empire, to evidence which might claim to play a role in the context of Jesus.[34] Gadara just to the south east of the lake Galilee was known for Cynics (Menippous, Meleagar, Oenamaus). Both Jesus' challenge to authorities

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[32] See the volume, L. Levine (ed.) *Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York/Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), which contains a number of contributions directly or indirectly dealing with Galilean archaeology.

[33] Mack, *Myth of Innocence.*; and *The Lost Gospel*; F. G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992); F. G. Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); F. G. Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom* (London: SCM, 1987); Downing has promoted the view that Jesus should be seen as close to the Cynics, who in the first century were wandering preachers, turning up at market places or meals, espousing critique of accepted norms, including the cult, challenging dependence on wealth and the wealthy and calling for honesty and integrity, often in a way that shocked, and frequently with wit and smart pithy sayings. They called for simplicity and trust in God, as the birds and plants are cared for. Many parallels with Jesus and his manner. Problems: the parallels are drawn from many centuries, though some. See esp. the collection in A. J. Malherbe (ed.) *The Cynic Epistles* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977). Were they in Galilee? Yes in Gadara - a school, but we have to guess. Would Jesus have espoused their ways, ignored them, been indirectly influenced? Sepphoris, built on Hellenistic lines, near Nazareth, but settled by Jews.

[34] See the critical discussion in Wright, *Jesus*, 66-74; see also H. D. Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis" *Journal of Religion* 74 (1994) 453-475.

and to the power systems of wealth, family and religion, and his use of pithy sayings (and the anecdotes which record them) bear a fascinating resemblance.[35] Did Judaism have its own brand of such wisdom? Crossan speaks of Jesus as a peasant Jewish Cynic.[36] In Mack he is less Jewish and more a Cynic.

3. What then emerges from current studies?

In seeking to offer an overview I will inevitably not do justice to the distinctiveness of the contributions of those mentioned and none at all to those whom space prevents me from discussing. In general I believe there are two main trends: the Cynic sage non eschatological model and the Jewish eschatological model. There are also a number who share aspects of both.

The Jesus Seminar established by Robert Funk belongs more within the first trend. It appears to have been persuaded by Mack and others to esteem Q and Thomas highly and Mark less highly. It also (accordingly, perhaps, since there are inevitable circularities) tends to espouse a non-eschatological model of Jesus. Mack's position is extreme in focusing almost entirely on the earliest layer of Q. The Jesus who emerges is a witty Cynic confronting the established values of society, with scarcely a trace of Jewishness. It is an image which will have contemporary appeal in the corridors of academia. That correspondence in itself may arouse our suspicion, but should no more count against the construct than any other such correspondence.

The weakness of Mack's position is that he has to explain away too much of the rest of the Jesus tradition. Crossan is more tentative about the Cynic analogy, but employs the socio-economic model, along with equal votes for all gospel sources, to produce a non eschatological Jesus, arguing for a brokerless kingdom: an immediacy of access to God beyond and outside of the institution and seeking to transform society accordingly. Borg's Jesus has more Jewish traits but strongly emphasis the model of sage, Spirit person, which allows Borg wide scope in popularising his work and connecting Jesus to popular religious models of our day.[37] All are members of the Jesus Seminar. One of the major weaknesses in all three is the attempted elimination of material which preserves Jesus' eschatological focus. As a result we are asked to imagine a Jesus who began with an eschatological John the Baptist and was followed by an eschatological Church, but himself had no interest in such matters.

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35 See Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 172-207.

36 Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 421.

37 On Borg see n. 31 above.

It is scarcely convincing to explain the disparity with theories of a split with John (or that the link with John was secondary) and of a Jesus group all but swamped by others who espoused the different eschatological agenda.

The other major trend has been to emphasise Jesus' Jewishness. The Jewish scholar, Vermes, acclaimed Jesus' Jewishness, proposing that he should be seen as a holy man, hasid after the model of Honi the circle maker and Hanina ben Dosa.[38] The proposal has had some impact on Borg's construct. The problem has been that Vermes's rabbinic sources are late. More significant has been the work of Sanders who brought to focus the need for a reassessment of Judaism within New Testament scholarship. Looking back it appears now to have been relatively easy to demonstrate that across the diverse writings which are exstant there is a fairly constant emphasis on Torah as God's gift and on the priority of God's grace.[39] Caricatures of Judaism as a system of self justification by accumulating merit, borne of reading Paul's disputes with fellow Christian Jews as a source for understanding Judaism as a whole and of historical disputes within post Reformation western Christianity, are slowly giving way to more sensitive and differentiating assessment. While Sanders's attempt to portray a "common Judaism" has not convinced all,[40] there can be no question but that he has made a strong case for understanding Jesus in his Jewish context. In doing so (with a healthy scepticism about reconstructing sayings and an emphasis more on likely events) Sanders emphasises Jesus' faithfulness to Torah and his espousal of restoration eschatology. Conflict emerges in particular over Jesus' declaration of God's judgement against the temple. To my mind Sanders is unnecessarily sceptical about anecdotes portraying Jesus in dispute with extremists over sabbath law and company at meals.

The importance of Sanders's exposition of restoration theology is that it provides a context for Jesus' preaching about the kingdom. The hope was not some vague utopian dream but a vision of changed reality, especially for Israel. For the poor and for oppressed Israel it is good news. It will bring reversal. The imagery associated with this hope in the Jesus tradition reflects prophetic hope for Israel's restoration, the gathering of the lost and scattered sheep, the eschatological banquet, the renewal or rebuilding of the temple, the establishment of new leadership on the twelve thrones of Israel, and signs of healing and deliverance. This makes sense of the particularity

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38 G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1971); G. Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993).

39 See the demonstration in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: Scm, 1977). See also Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*.

40 See Neusner's criticism (n. 26 above).

of Jesus' vision and ministry, focused on Israel.

Sanders emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus' eschatological hopes finds affirmation in Wright's massive volume on the historical Jesus, part of an ambitious undertaking to write a comprehensive account of New Testament Theology.[41] Wright's work, very readable, and replete with strong assertions, sometimes not argued in detail, but mounted as "surely reasonable",[42] takes Sanders's notion of restoration eschatology further. He speaks regularly of the hope for the completion of the return from exile. The language feels somewhat imposed on the material, more so than the general language of restoration which Sanders used. It suggests the strength of a motif which is not directly present. Nevertheless my chief difficulty with Wright's construct is that it has been set within the frame espoused by Caird and influential in Borg's work.[43] According to this perspective we misread Jewish apocalyptic if we think it is talking about the end of the world. We should understand its colourful imagery as expressing warning and hope about Israel's immediate future. Jesus was offering an alternative to the way of being Israel, which, if pursued, would lead the nation to disaster.[44]

There is doubtless much truth in this, but I find Wright overplays this emphasis.

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41 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (see n. 1 above).

42 At a number of points I find Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* , uncritical. See, for instance, his use of the Sermon on the Mount, 287-292, the Lukan Nazareth manifesto, 179-180, and the Jerusalem chapters of Mark, 489-510. The case for historicity is not well established.

43 G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone, 1965); G. B. Caird and L. D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1994).

44 So Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* , 320-368. There he cites his earlier work, *Christian Origins and the Question of God. Vol 1. The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992): "*There is virtually no evidence that Jews were expecting the end of the space-time universe.* There is abundant evidence that they . . . knew a good metaphor when they saw one, and used comsic imagery to bring out the full theological significance of cataclysmic socio-political events (333; italics as in original). Similarly Wright makes much use of the mtoif of return from exile. I found this a disturbing feature of the book, because it occurs constantly and frequently feels forced on the material of the gospels, which do include related motifs but these are not all encompassed by that image or necessarily connected with it as motif (eg. the dominant motif, kingdom), however close its origins may be to the kind of hope expressed in Isa 52:7. Wright's treatment of the Law issue is also unsatisfactory: "All that the temple stood for was now available through Jesus and his movement" (*Jesus and the People of God*, 436). This is effectively a return to the problematic view that Jesus in fact abrogated much of Torah and all the attendant difficulties which that view has faced since the work of Sanders and others.

Eschatological imagery is not be collapsed into contemporary politico-religious commentary. Ideas of a judgement day, of resurrection, of being at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the restored Israel, suggest something of grander scale established by divine initiative. Wright's analysis, though much less sceptical than that of Jesus Seminar scholars, nevertheless is vulnerable to similar criticism. How then could there be such discontinuity between the alleged understanding of eschatology shared by Jesus (and Wright would argue, John the Baptist) and that of the early church? The problem is that he has posed the alternatives too sharply. We may agree: not a prediction of the end of the world; but a good deal more than return and renewal. Transformation and transfiguration, judgement and resurrection, do suggest something in between.

The most careful, painstaking, current project is that of J. P. Meier, who introduces his project as based on a fantasy of what a Catholic, a Protestant, Jew, and an agnostic scholar, using the resources of the Harvard library, might agree to say about the historical Jesus.[45] Thus far two volumes have appeared, already 1500 pages! While conscious of the difference between faith in Jesus and the task of historical reconstruction, though not as sharply as Luke Johnson,[46] Meier proceeds with methodological rigour, but always, it seems to me, with a keen eye for how faith might respond to his constructions.[47] What emerges is more the reality of a careful Catholic biblical scholar attentive to the Church's agenda, yet seeking not to be too bound by it, after the model of Raymond Brown. It is still too early to comment on his work as a whole, since his treatment of Jesus and the Law, for instance, is still outstanding. Thus far it represents a cautious, some might say more conservative, approach to the historical data, with fine discussions of Jesus' origins, Jesus and John the Baptist, the kingdom of God, and miracles. It is less racy than Wright's work and more rigorous in methodology.

4. The Historical Jesus Puzzle

Historical Jesus research is like working over a jigsaw puzzle. We are far from just having emptied the box onto the table and exposed 1000 or 2000 fragments. From the musings of many generations of scholars we can identify clusters, larger pieces of the puzzle. For many of us the constellation of unfinished work as its stands is already enough to suggest meaningful contours. History needs a good

45 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol 1, 1.

46 see n. 2 above

47 This is especially so in his treatment of Jesus' birth in the first volume and in treatment of miracles in the second.

dose of imagination for anything to emerge and deceives itself if it believes it can produce completed puzzles. History remains a matter of degrees of probability. It seems to me that there are some large identifiable clusters, even if, like reconstructions of the sky and the sea, we may eventually find the clusters are not perfectly put together in themselves.

One cluster is Jesus' eschatological outlook, commonly linked with what must have been his favoured term: "the kingdom of God", which we might paraphrase as the expectation and hope that there will come a time when God will rule, restoring Israel to wholeness, liberating her from her oppressors, and bringing righteousness and peace to the land. It seems to me that there is little doubt that his was a version of Israel's hope and that it stood beside other versions, many of which would have been in conflict with his own. He appears to have spoken of this hope primarily in relation to what it would mean for ordinary people, but not just as individuals but as part of the community of Israel. His vision had to entail changes in Israel's leadership and liberation from oppressive powers, but does not appear to have entailed a political or military strategy. It is clear that he spoke of this hope with the kind of immediacy with which John the Baptist had warned of God's impending judgement and that he saw his own ministry as already being an indication that the hope was beginning to be realised.

The vision of inclusiveness expressed itself already in his radical inclusiveness in reality. The vision of liberation already expressed itself in reality in individual acts of healing and exorcism, which, in turn, reinforced the reality of what was to come in fullness. I think we see in Jesus' kingdom sayings both the joy of anticipation of what is to come and the celebration that it had begun to advance into the present. But major components of the vision were still outstanding. Still to come was the great restoration, establishment of justice and peace, the resurrection and the judgement. Still his followers (and the poor and hungry who had received promises) are to pray, "Your kingdom come!" I am not convinced that Jesus' vision of the kingdom should be collapsed into individual or community well being in the present. Nevertheless the strength of its hope was grounded in more than faith; it was grounded in what people saw happening in the present which went beyond hopeful anticipation. This large piece, as I see it, must retain its awkward shape: Jesus' hope did not become reality as he apparently supposed, but that is a problem for theology.

In this context I have already mentioned a second cluster of pieces. Jesus appears to have practised exorcism and, despite the accretion of many doubtful features, the tradition gives weight to the conclusion that he was also a healer. Such activities were seen (by him and those around him) as evidence that Israel's prophetic hopes were reaching fulfilment. It seems very likely that they were seen as manifestations

of God's Spirit, as promised for the time of salvation. This cluster should not be shunted aside in the interests of appeasing the modern world.

Another cluster already touched upon is the radical inclusiveness which appears characteristic of Jesus. This may need some qualification because his stance towards the Syrophoenician woman was initially far from inclusive.[48] Nevertheless, at least within Israel and perhaps with initial reluctance towards Gentiles, Jesus appears to have shown an inclusiveness which in turn led to controversy. This behaviour must be directly related to the value given to compassion in his sayings and the theology of compassion which informs his statements about God, including the nature of God's coming reign. It was in that context that the radical inclusiveness is to be understood: doing now what is envisaged as coming about then. The theology establishes its warrant by appeal to every day experience in family life rather than to Israel's epic traditions. This all coheres well with a stance which gave value to the ordinary in contrast to the institutionalised forms of religious experience and tradition ("not as the scribes"). The inclusiveness ranges across acceptance of the disadvantaged like the poor, women, the sick and disabled, children to keeping company with sinners (toll collectors and prostitutes), although the precise nature of the statement Jesus was making by being in such company is still, to my mind, somewhat uncertain.

Jesus' Jewishness, including the assumption that he was Torah observant, must be a central cluster in the puzzle. Images of Jesus as somehow standing above or outside his own religious tradition strain credibility. He was not a Christian among Jews but a Jew. His interpretations of Torah, whether in witty defence or in occasional exposition of its values and sometimes its specific commandments, fall within the range of Judaism known to exist in the period. This makes it all the more interesting to identify his particular slant or slants in interpretation and to understand the areas of conflict. The Markan tradition preserves anecdotes which portray a clever Jesus engaging in refutation by wit and aphorism rather than by argument, and doing so seemingly over against rather extreme legalist positions. There seems to be a common feature across all main streams of the tradition of Jesus rejecting sham and espousing compassion as the primary value and criterion for applying scriptural law. But such prioritising still included observance of purity laws, tithing and such like, even at times detailed observance. It makes sense to me that beside the compassion oriented stance of Jesus we sometimes glimpse a conservatism in some areas such as sexuality and dealings with Gentiles which may reflect the conservative Jewish upbringing

[48] See W. Loader, "Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark's Tradition" *JSNT* 63 (1996) 45-61.

which the family names suggest.[49]

Scholars who see parallels with popular Cynicism are identifying in particular those sayings and behaviours which portray Jesus as tilting at hypocrisy, scourging opponents with wit and aphorism, confronting the established values with challenges to the power of wealth and family, including in his lifestyle, and arguing from common every day experiences about faith and providence. Such behaviours also bring Jesus into close connection with Israel's wisdom tradition. He may even have used wisdom mythology to explain his ministry and John's.[50] It remains striking, however, that there is so much material which appears to have close parallels in the popular philosophy of the time. The problem remains understanding the connections, if any. Were there such secular philosophers in Galilee? What would a conservative Jesus be doing imitating them? Was he, like second century Christian writers, employing their wiles to attack the evils of his day? Is the connection rather more secondary? Was there a Jewish tradition which, like Israel's wisdom tradition, drew on the wisdom resources of surrounding cultures? I think these pieces form a coherent structure. I can see how they connect to Jesus' radical message of the kingdom and to his theology, but for the moment the connections beyond that remain incomplete. But these pieces are not the unattached grouping Mack would have us believe.

The most worn pieces of the puzzle reflect Christian preoccupations with titles of

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[49] See also Meier. *Marginal Jew* Vol 1, 205-208 and generally on Jesus' stance see W. Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law. A Study of the Gospels.* WUNT 2.97 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997) and also forthcoming: W. Loader, *Jesus and the Fundamentalism of his Day. Jesus, the Bible and the Church* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, due late 1997 or early 1998).

[50] E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus. Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM, 1994) focuses on the few sayings in Q which have Jesus speak of Sophia (Wisdom) or in wisdom language, to argue a theology of Jesus with God as Sophia, and of an egalitarian inclusiveness (women, especially) related to a compassionate parent image of God, but now overlaid by men's reporting, argued earlier in her *In Memory of Her*: *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). A strand like this is there and in different ways it reappears in John (Logos and Wisdom Torah images, bread, light, life) and Paul (firstborn, mediator of creation, image of God). The issue of overlay is hard to assess - feasible, but what are the controls? There may be a danger of ignoring less acceptable traditions - what if Jesus does not reflect the ideal? Borg favours the sage approach in his *Meeting Jesus* as does B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995).

authority. Of messiah there are few and these are so ambiguous that the most we might dare to say is that if Jesus saw himself in this light, he left history to define its connotation, so that during his ministry it could have only a chameleon-like quality, a cause for chiding those who espoused it. Yet the strength of its presence in the early accounts of Jesus' trial and death may indicate that it belonged in some sense to Jesus' self understanding and surfaced in the final conflict. Otherwise it seems strange that what seems incidental soon became the symbolic focus of Jewish Christian faith and usurped the kingdom of God as the dominant motif of their preaching.[51] One dark piece of the puzzle seems to fit in two different directions: Son of Man. It sits quite well with the imagery of future hope as one of a few strands of speculation expounding the great vision of Daniel 7.[52] Others see in it a self effacing self designation of some anonymity.[53] Certainly the pieces do not constitute an image of a pre-existent revealer such as appears in John's model of the heavenly envoy and formed the basis for the church's great christological constructions of later centuries. The presence of God is more to be found in the events and encounters than in self claims, but the former certainly gave rise in time to seeing the whole as a divine encounter.

The sombre colours which make up the image of Jesus' last days reflect responses to Jesus' provocative behaviour in the temple. These two pieces clear fit together in some way. The larger picture indicates in my view that Jesus understood himself (and God) to be on a collision course with the temple authorities and he must have suspected it would cost him his life. We cannot imagine his imaginings so we do not know whether he expected some kind of divine intervention to be occasioned by his pilgrimage. Vindication would have to have been part of it and resurrection at the end time would have been a standard expectation, even if vindication had not been an issue. It is probably irrecoverable whether at the last supper he really foresaw his death as having vicarious significance, as some early strands of Christian tradition were to believe and make the focal point of their message, indeed of the whole story. It was clearly not the whole point of the story during Jesus' ministry; at least none of

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[51] See the discussion in N. A. Dahl, *The Crucified Messiah and Other* Essays (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974); and "Messianic Ideas and the Crucifixion of Jesus," in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.) *The Messiah. Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 382-403.

[52] H. E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* (London; SCM, 1965); F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1969); A. Y. Collins, "The Origin of the Designation of Jesus as 'Son of Man'," *HTR* 80 (1987) 391-407.

[53] Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; B. Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man* (London: SPCK, 1983); D. R. A. Hare, *The Son of Man* tradition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

the early traditions suggest this was so. The later image of a Jesus coming to die for our sins has very few pieces on the table of the historical puzzle, however aptly it may interpret his death in retrospect. Yet the last days complete an image not of deluded visionary or failed reformer, but of one who confronted systems of power to the point of ultimate vulnerability. The result is an enigma which some find revelatory and others find pathetic or tragic.

It is a matter of debate whether the colourful resurrection and appearance pieces belong in the puzzle or constitute their own secondary puzzle. Their story is about the disciples' perceptions, perhaps more than about an empty tomb which may be more of a deduction than a reality. But there is little doubt that in the minds of the disciples Jesus had been vindicated as he would have in some sense hoped and that this event provided not only evidence of his exaltation to God's presence but also of the truth of his claim that the kingdom of God was at hand. Disciples with a different anthropology and eschatology might have seen it differently, but theirs implied that to live on had to mean he lived in an embodied state even though at a higher order of reality and that to be raised in this way was a promise preserved for the climax of history. They were indeed living in the last days.

The pieces lie on the table. I have tried to depict them as I see them in their own setting and with their own integrity. This has included sensing where they are strange to us and where they at present appear unconnected and unable to be connected. It is my conviction that any historical reconstruction must take these pieces or clusters of pieces seriously. The temptation will always be to leave the awkward ones to one side or to bring together only those which give us a more commendable image. Unfinished puzzles drive some people to distraction. Forcing the pieces never really works because it creates other gaps. We can only visit and revisit the table, try new possibilities, sense the contours which emerge, and sometimes, maybe, take much of what we thought fitted together well apart and start all over again. For some, puzzles are a distraction, a wonderful time waster and historical Jesus research little different. For others, each puzzle is a challenge. But this is one which will not be conquered. I think there is enough of a pattern there on the table for me to recognise where my faith in the Jesus story connects to some reality. But I am not there desperately hoping for faith's validation. The story fascinates me. It belongs to a history which has given shape to who we are. In it we find again the fragility of knowing and not knowing and beyond it the lonely responsibility of decision and faith which creates community.