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WHOSE JEWISH JESUS?

PART ONE: THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN RETRIEVALS
OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS CONTRASTED

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PART ONE: THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN
RETRIEVALS OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS
CONTRASTED

Michael D. Eldridge

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The Jesus of History

‘Jesus the Jew – but what sort of Jew?’ asks John P. Meier in a lecture given in 2002.¹ The question is significant for two reasons. First, it reflects a relatively recent emphasis within mainstream, predominantly Christian, scholarship: scholars now take very seriously the fact that Jesus was a Jew operating in a first century Jewish culture and environment. Second, the context in which the question is put is a new endeavour – usually called the Third Quest – to find out what kind of person Jesus really was as a historical figure living, acting and meeting death on the stage of first century Galilee and Judea. This is an enterprise in which a number of eminent scholars of undoubted Christian faith have been engaged, including James Dunn (Emeritus NT Professor of Durham University and a Methodist), Tom Wright (now retired Bishop of Durham and a leading Anglican evangelical) and John P. Meier, (a prominent American Roman Catholic scholar and priest).

Why Engage With the Search for the Historical Jesus?

Quite understandably, those who like me take a high view of the authority of Scripture and hold to a high Christology, may be wary of using the methods of historical research to find out what kind of person the historical Jesus was. Nevertheless, I believe this is a valid and godly enterprise, and, in the case of those who seek to share their faith in Jesus with Jewish people, this may become an increasingly necessary one. This is because the Christian message has an essentially historical character: God became a human being at the Incarnation; He suffered as a human being on the Cross; and in between He lived as a human being in a specific historical period, in a particular country and social setting. The whole message is rooted in history, and so the Jesus who lived on earth as a man requires our attention and should not be beyond historical investigation, so far as that is possible.

In an article intended to persuade evangelical Christians to welcome engagement with historical Jesus research, Michael Bird makes this same point by contrasting the historical character of Christianity with the religion of Buddhism:

*If you could prove that Buddha never existed, nothing would change with Buddhist religious practice; the four noble truths would still be noble and the eight-fold path would remain the only means to attaining nirvana. Christianity, by contrast, stands or falls with its claim to historical character.*²

For the believer in Jesus, who is in contact with Jewish people and seeks to introduce them to their Messiah, the “Jesus of history” question may well come up in a most pointed form. For increasingly, Jewish people who know something about the Christian faith will respond on these lines: “Yes, but the Jesus who lived on earth was one of us. He was one the great teachers of the Law of Moses. He was also a great miracle worker,

1 This lecture, which I highly recommend, may be viewed on the Internet.

2 Michael Bird, ‘Should Evangelicals Participate in the “Third Quest” for the Historical Jesus?’ Themelios 29.2, 2004, p. 10.

a charismatic healer, maybe even like one of our Prophets. But everything you say about Him that separates Him from Judaism – for example, that He was both God and man, or rose from the dead or was the expected Messiah – comes from His first followers, who after the disappointment of the Crucifixion put their own construction on the events of Easter week.’ It is worth examining this approach further and understanding how it has arisen.

The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus

The approach I refer to arises out of a historical movement described in the German literature as *die Heimholung Jesu* – the bringing home of Jesus. Referring to this description, Gösta Lindeskog comments:

*The heretic, whose name the Jews refused to utter because of everything they had suffered on his account, is now welcomed home to his own, to a people who themselves have again received a homeland. It is not, however, as ‘the heretic’ that he is welcomed home, but rather as one of the great persons in the history of the Jewish faith.*³

This significant shift has come about mainly in the last hundred years.⁴

In the later Rabbinic literature, there are a few isolated references to Jesus (or perhaps originally to some other figure, but subsequently identified with Jesus) that take Him as a miracle-working deceiver who tried to lead the people astray (see Deuteronomy 13:1-3). In the Middle Ages the general attitude of Jewish people towards Jesus is reflected in the popular work, *Toledot Yesbu*, in which Jesus is the illegitimate son of a Jewish woman, Miriam, who had been violated by a Roman soldier while she was engaged. When grown up, Jesus managed, by deceit, to obtain divine secrets by means of which he was able to perform astounding miracles and so attempt to beguile faithful Jews. In due course he was crucified on the ground of sorcery. Following his burial, the Jewish leaders were thrown into consternation on finding the tomb empty, but a renowned Rabbi chanced upon a certain gardener who confessed that he had taken the body and buried it in his garden.

Such highly negative portrayals reflect the oppression suffered by Jews, following Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire and later of its successor states. Even today Lawrence Kushner, a Jew with good relations with Christians, confesses:

*I am wary of Jesus because of history and what so many of those who said they believed in him have done to my people. Christianity, you could say, has ruined Jesus for me.*⁵

3 Foreword to Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, 1984, p. 9.

4 For a more comprehensive survey, see Hagner, *Jewish Reclamation*, pp. 41-71. It should be stressed that while this movement has a strong following within Reform Judaism, by and large it is opposed by Orthodox Judaism.

5 Lawrence Kushner, ‘My Lunch with Jesus’, in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* (Beatrice Bruteau, ed.) 2001, p. 120.

Origins of the New Jewish Goodwill Towards Jesus

The impetus for a change in the traditional Jewish stance towards Jesus arose from the emancipation of the Jews, which itself flowed from the Enlightenment of the 18th century and its practical implementation in Western and Central Europe in the decades following the French Revolution. When Jews began to gain entry into the broader society as fellow-citizens, it was inevitable that some of them should take initiatives to come to terms with the prevailing culture. This factor accounts for the birth of Reform Judaism and the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement within Judaism. In turn, some Jewish scholars in the 19th century undertook to give explanations of the origins of Christianity using the methods of historical research.

In the latter half of the 19th century the notable Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz, included in Volume 3 of his major *History of the Jews* a section on Jesus and the origin of Christianity. According to Graetz, Jesus' mission was not to form a new religion, but to reform Judaism. Jesus, however, never abolished the ritual parts of the Mosaic Law such as circumcision, the food-laws and Sabbath observance, as His later followers were to do, and apart from having a special healing ministry, He was not unlike the near contemporary, Hillel. In the distinctive parts of Jesus' teaching, Graetz was impressed with their similarity to the beliefs of the Essenes, for example, the value placed on poverty and the sharing of property. About the same time as Graetz was writing his *History*, another eminent Jewish scholar, Abraham Geiger, was lecturing on Jewish history and published three essays on Jesus and His disciples. For Geiger, Jesus had to be understood as a Pharisee who mistakenly saw Himself as central to the realisation of the longed-for Messianic age. However, He affirmed the eternal validity of the Law, and brought nothing essentially new to Judaism. Graetz was a staunch supporter of Orthodox Judaism and Geiger an ardent advocate of Reform Judaism, yet both expressed appreciation of Jesus as a Jew.

Following these significant shifts in the 19th century, we reach the major figure whose approach underlies all subsequent Jewish scholarship aimed to recapture Jesus as 'one of us', namely Claude Goldsmid Montefiore (1858 – 1938). Montefiore, a leading proponent of Liberal Judaism, was to become, in 1926, President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. He was also an Oxford scholar and the first Jew to write a major commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. In this two-volume work, in contrast to 'the atomistic treatment' previously followed by Jewish scholars that simply took 'the admittedly admirable sayings of Jesus' and set against them 'the excellent parallels in the Old Testament and the Rabbinical writings', Montefiore aimed to show that "it is right and possible for a Jew to look at the Gospels in a more historical, comprehensive and impartial spirit". To this end he believed, rightly, that 'the "cross bench" mind with which I chanced to be born' would prove an advantage.⁶ In this task he drew on some of the leading proponents of Gospel criticism in his day, especially Loisy, Wellhausen and Johannes Weiss, and in addition for

6 C.G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (Second Edition revised and rewritten, 1927) Vol. I, p. xx.

his second edition, Streeter and Bultmann, but without hesitating to point out where he considered them prejudiced or ignorant of Jewish thought or Jewish life.⁷

In a subsequent work, Montefiore sought to counter the misunderstandings of Rabbinic Judaism cherished by Christian scholars who were dependent on the Strass-Billerbeck collection of Rabbinic parallels. So, for example, against the widely held belief that Judaism was a religion based on works-righteousness, Montefiore sums up the views of the Rabbis as:

1) Man does, as a matter of fact, garner or acquire merits: he, as it were, collects tickets on which or through which, he obtains rewards. But we may no less say:

2) Man has no claim upon God. This view meets us not infrequently, though hardly as frequently as (1).

3) All God's rewards are due to His goodness, His mercy, His grace.⁸

As to another charge against Judaism, namely, that the Rabbis 'knew nothing of man's incapacity of his own power to acquire a complete and adequate righteousness before God', Montefiore accepted that while this doctrine was not found among them, they would not have considered 'the righteousness of the Patriarchs and of Moses to have been entirely achieved *aus eigener Kraft*, by their own unaided power.'⁹ Such comments typify Montefiore's constant seeking to be fair to both sides and his sympathy with both Judaism and Christianity.

Much of Montefiore's work centres on Jesus' relation to the Law and to what extent His teaching lies within the parameters of interpretation of the Law. Essentially Montefiore saw Jesus as a teacher of the Law, albeit one having a unique moral authority, and akin to one of the best of the Pharisees. Montefiore also saw Jesus' teachings as breathing the spirit of the Prophets; here he points to Jesus' stress on the inner motive as against the outward action, his warnings against externalism and the summons to true spirituality. So, for Montefiore, 'Jesus occupies the remarkable position of resuming the work and role of the prophets. He is in the genuine succession to Amos and Isaiah.'¹⁰

In his day, Montefiore incurred the hostility of fellow-Jews, especially the Orthodox, both for his positive evaluation of Jesus and for his taking Him to be one of Israel's great prophets. Notwithstanding such opposition, Montefiore's approach was to take root, especially among Liberal Jewish scholars. Hagner, in his survey of subsequent Jewish scholarship, notes 'the remarkable extent to which he anticipates what later Jewish scholars have written about Jesus. When one is familiar with his writings, one finds that there is little that is really new in the burgeoning Jewish literature of our day.'¹¹ 'The substantial shape of the Jewish approach to Jesus *has not altered significantly*.'¹²

7 C.G.Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, Preface to the Second Edition, Vol. I, pp. ix and xxii.

8 C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*, 1930, p. 295.

9 C.G.Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 19-21.

10 C.G.Montefiore, *The Old Testament and After* (1923) p. 229.

11 Hagner, *Jewish Reclamation*, p. 38.

12 Hagner, *Jewish Reclamation*, p. 27.

While of course there are important differences between individual Jewish scholars, there is ‘a recognizable pattern’¹³ which shapes their writings. So, it will not be misleading to take one of them as representative of the whole. Because Geza Vermes’ books are quite well-known, I will take his work as the representative example.

Geza Vermes

Vermes is an eminent scholar whose high reputation is rightly deserved. He began his scholarly career working on the then newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls and his theory as to the origins and history of the Dead Sea/Essene sect has gained widespread acceptance. He is also the editor of a widely-used English edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and was one of the three joint-editors of the revised E. Schürer: *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*. His books on the historical Jesus, beginning with *Jesus the Jew*, (1973), are aimed at a more general audience and are written in a moderate, charitable manner but nonetheless with the specific aim of establishing Jesus as a religious figure fully within Judaism, as opposed to Christianity, and as a challenge to Christians to accept that:

*The religion of Jesus and Christianity are so basically different in form, purpose and orientation that it would be historically unsafe to derive the latter from the former and attribute the changes to a straightforward doctrinal evolution.*¹⁴

The procedure Vermes uses to extract Jesus the Jew from what he would see as Christian reworking is to apply, as ‘adapted and supplemented where necessary’,¹⁵ the criteria derived from form criticism for establishing authenticity as brought together and expounded by the British scholar, Norman Perrin, in his *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (1967). These criteria, subject to various caveats, have gained wide acceptance across the scholarly spectrum.

The first and most important of these criteria is that of *dissimilarity* or *discontinuity*. Perrin defines this test thus: ‘the earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church.’¹⁶ A somewhat similar and essentially overlapping criterion is that which John P. Meier has termed *embarrassment* – essentially the case where a saying of Jesus clearly created difficulty for the primitive church, for example, as with Jesus’ teaching on divorce. Perrin’s second criterion was that of *coherence* – the case where the saying is consistent with the body of teaching already found authentic by other tests. Thirdly, there is the criterion of *multiple attestation* – that is where the same teaching is attested in more than one literary source as well as in more than one literary form, such as

13 Hagner, *Jewish Reclamation*, p. 37.

14 Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* [RJJ] 1993, p. 214.

15 RJJ, p. 7; the approach is set out in Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* [JWJ] 1983, pp. 21–26.

16 N. Perrin., *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 1967, p. 39.

in sayings, parables, stories or pronouncements.

A lot has been written about the limitations of these criteria.¹⁷ Perhaps the most important one is that the criterion of dissimilarity on its own is likely to produce a constricted and lop-sided portrayal of Jesus, because it could hardly be expected that most of His teaching was discontinuous with both the beliefs of the Jewish milieu in which He grew up and those of the primitive Church.¹⁸ As to the criterion of multiple attestation, Perrin accepts that ‘the usefulness of this criterion is somewhat restricted. It will ... tend to be more useful in arriving at general characteristics of the ministry and teaching of Jesus than at specific elements in the teaching itself.’¹⁹ In general these tests result in a Christ whose outline is much less distinct than the Christ of the Gospels, as is the case with the Jesus emerging from the Jesus Seminar, but conversely a scholar like John P. Meier is able, using the same criteria, to establish a more filled-out Jesus who is recognizably similar to the one portrayed in the Gospels, as taken from a straightforward reading of them.

But most significantly, Vermes adds to these criteria certain other tests which he considers the independent historian, not committed to the Christian faith, should use. The first of these is that of taking apparent *inconsistencies* as an indication that one of the traditions is inauthentic: “If one saying ascribed to Jesus appears to be sharply at variance with another, they cannot both be authentic.”²⁰ An example Vermes gives is the positive attitude Jesus generally displayed towards ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ in the Gospels contrasted with the contempt expressed in Matthew 8:17, “If (your brother) refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax-collector”.

A second additional test that Vermes applies concerns *implausibility*. This covers the case where some explicitly Christian concept stands apart from the normal Jewish way of looking at things in Jesus’ day. Vermes expresses this test thus:

*No objective and critical evaluation of the Gospels can overlook the impact of Jesus’ tragic fate on the first chroniclers of his story and on the evangelists themselves ... The historian’s eye will therefore inevitably look for the hand of early Christian apologists in those parts of the story which first imply, and subsequently try to prove, that contrary to common Jewish expectation, the violent death of the Messiah was divinely foreordained.*²¹

These two tests enable Vermes to set aside specifically Christian beliefs that are not acceptable to Jews, such as the atoning death of Jesus, His divine nature, His being the Judge in the final judgement. The detailed application of these tests can be followed in Vermes’ *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*. In the closing, summarising chapter, Vermes reaches

17 For a brief review, see James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 2003, pp. 81-83.

18 This point has often been made: see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 82.

19 N. Perrin, *Rediscovering*, pp. 46-47.

20 JWJ, p. 22.

21 JWJ, pp. 23-25.

three conclusions, which are not surprising given the procedure he follows:

1. Jesus intended to address only Jews; He did not expect the gospel to benefit the entire non-Jewish world.
2. Jesus expected the actual establishment of the Kingdom of God in His own lifetime, not after His Second Coming, nor yet, in the far distant future.
3. Jesus did not announce His coming death and resurrection to His disciples in advance. His arrest, crucifixion and reported resurrection took them completely by surprise.²²

These conclusions have far-reaching ramifications. So, for example, according to Vermes, the parable of the wicked tenants cannot be authentic, because Jesus could not have expected Gentiles to enter the Kingdom, let alone displace the Jewish people; likewise the parables speaking of the Second Coming or its delay are ruled out, for example the parable of the talents, the thief in the night, and so on.

A third additional test that Vermes employs from time to time is to look to (what he takes as) the *probable life setting* to account for any teaching that is not normally found in the Judaism of Jesus' time. An example of the use of this test concerns Jesus' warnings against the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Vermes rules these out because they reflect Jewish-Christian hostility towards the Pharisees, which did not arise until after the birth of the Church.²³ Vermes' use of this test is often signalled by a reference to Rudolf Bultmann's *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Bultmann, as one of the main pioneers of form criticism, strove to identify the settings in which the various layers of tradition arose, and in fact attributed much of the Gospel material to editing by the Palestinian church (sic). For example, in a summarising chapter headed 'The Editing of the Traditional Material', Bultmann wrote of Q (the material common to Matthew and Luke) "in the speech material, which *in overwhelming proportions* derives from the Palestinian Church, we find some Hellenistic material from time to time" [italics mine].²⁴ However, many scholars today do not share Bultmann's deep scepticism over the paucity of the authentic material that goes back to Jesus, John P. Meier being a notable case in point.

The overall effect of applying Vermes' additional tests is to exclude from his portrayal of Jesus everything that is incompatible with a Judaism that leads into and is at one with the subsequent Rabbinic Judaism, that has been transmitted in its various forms to the present day. It would not be unfair to say of Vermes, as Hagner does of the Jewish scholars generally who seek to reclaim Jesus:

Despite claims of objectivity, Jewish scholars begin with an unjustified and overly narrow delimitation of Jewishness – one that is already in reaction to Christianity – and proceed to define the historical Jesus accordingly. But

22 Geza Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* [AGJ] 2004, pp. 376–404.

23 AGJ, p. 423. Compare Montefiore's similar use of Gospel criticism. On this parable he cites with approval Streeter's comment: 'it reads like an early Jewish Christian polemical pamphlet against their oppressors, the Pharisees' (Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels*, Vol. II, p. 296.).

24 Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, ET of the 2nd German edn., 1931, p. 328*.

*the result is that the portrait of Jesus and the representation of the teaching that they offer are in truth reflections of the Jewishness of the interpreters themselves.*²⁵

The Jesus that does emerge from Vermes' studies is nonetheless an attractive figure: one whose teaching had as its well-springs *teshuvah* – repentance and a corresponding confidence in divine forgiveness; *emunah* – trusting faith, the kind of faith that 'demands total commitment of the self to God even at the price of risk'; and a complete *Imitatio Dei* – 'an untiring effort to follow God as a model'.²⁶

As to Jesus' ministry, Vermes characterised Him as:

*a powerful healer of the physically and mentally sick, a friend of sinners, a magnetic preacher of what lies at the heart of the Law. He was always aware of the approach of the end of time, and, at the moment known only to God, of the imminent intervention of our Father who is in heaven, who is to be revealed soon, the awesome and just Judge.*²⁷

Thus for Vermes, Jesus was in part a teacher and interpreter of the Torah – in this he is at one with many other Jewish scholars who find Jesus to be essentially a sage or rabbi – and in part a charismatic exorcist and miracle-worker, the kind of *Hasid* or holy man Vermes held to be typical of the Galilee area.²⁸ But Vermes also sees Jesus as, in some sense, a prophet. Like Montefiore before him, Vermes notes that Jesus placed "an almost exaggerated accent on the *inward aspects* and *root causes* of the religious action" and so "marched in the footsteps of the great prophets of Israel".²⁹ In his earlier *Jesus the Jew*, Vermes had discussed the expectation of a revival of prophetic gifts in the First century, and how in the New Testament there are several instance of Jesus being regarded as a prophet, particularly by outsiders, 'a description which He Himself preferred'.³⁰ However, the sense in which Vermes regards Jesus as a prophet is as a charismatic *Hasid*, one whose 'personality, presence, the power of his voice, his awe-inspiring reputation as a wonder-worker, ensured that his words were accepted'.³¹

This is not the place to give a detailed critique of the now seven, partly overlapping, books Vermes has already written on Jesus. It is sufficient, for the present, to have drawn attention to the basic and, I believe, flawed presupposition reflected in his procedure: this

25 Hagner, *Jewish Reclamation*, p. 262.

26 RJJ, pp. 196-204.

27 RJJ, p. 206.

28 See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (JJ) pp. 51-61. As John P. Meier argues, Vermes' case for a succession of such holy men in the Galilee area is weak. The two individuals Vermes instances lived about a century apart, and there is no evidence that one of them – Honi the circle-drawer – ever ministered in the Galilee. Moreover, neither figure strictly performed miracles: Honi was renowned for the efficacy of his prayers; Hanina ben Dosa for spiritual insight as to which of the sick persons he prayed for would be healed. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. II, pp. 581-88.

29 RJJ, p. 195.

30 JJ, pp. 66-79. The citation is from p. 79.

31 RJJ, pp. 73-74.

is to discount anything in the Gospels that is irreconcilable with the Judaism of the time, as perceived through the eyes of subsequent Rabbinic Judaism. What I will do, however, is to contrast Vermes' overall characterisation of Jesus with that emerging from some recent Christian scholarship. For this purpose we must return to consideration of the Third Quest.

The Third Quest

James Dunn begins his introduction to the Third Quest with the comment:

*One of the most astonishing features of earlier quests is the way in which they have consistently attempted to distance Jesus as quickly and as far as possible from his Jewish milieu.*³²

Correcting this distancing of Jesus from His Jewish milieu is one of the distinguishing marks of the Third Quest.

Within mainstream, non-Jewish scholarship the turning point came with E.P. Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), in which Sanders undertook a comprehensive survey of what he saw as the 'common Judaism' of Jesus' day and sought to locate Jesus within it. Sanders' work also anticipated another characteristic of some more recent historical Jesus studies: the desire to identify Jesus' *aims* as the key to understanding Him as a historical agent. Sanders' seminal work gave a considerable impetus to the Third Quest for the historical Jesus.³³

There were a number of other reasons why, concerning the Third Quest, one could say that its time had come, in particular:

1. The discovery and subsequent publication and evaluation of the Dead Sea Scrolls was shedding light on some key aspects of first century Jewish religious thinking.
2. A similar effect was being achieved through the burgeoning of studies since the Second World War into all the non-canonical literature of the Second Temple period, including the Apocrypha and Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the Targums, Josephus and Philo.
3. The revolution in Rabbinic studies set in train by Jacob Neusner enabled the development of Rabbinic traditions to be plotted on a sounder basis than before and so gave rise to surer means of judging whether particular Rabbinic parallels could be traced back to the first century or otherwise reflected later developments within Rabbinic Judaism.
4. Some of the critical approaches that had developed earlier in the 20th century, such as those associated with form criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism in the broadest sense, including understanding the ways stories are told and how they 'work', studies into the transmission of oral tradition, and the use of the social

32 Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 86.

33 For an introduction to the various phases of historical Jesus research, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 1998, pp. 1-12, or Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 2003, pp. 17- 97. Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 1997, provides a more comprehensive treatment.

sciences, could now be drawn upon while exercising appropriate caution.

The Third Quest has given birth to some major works of scholarship.³⁴ Prominent among them are Tom Wright's two volumes, *The New Testament and the People of God*, and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1992 and 1996 respectively); and James Dunn's large one volume *Jesus Remembered* (2003).³⁵ Another major undertaking is John P. Meier's *A Marginal Jew*, the first four volumes of which have been published so far (1991, 1994, 2001 and 2009).

12 The significance of Ben Meyer

But before any of these major studies can be assessed in any meaningful way, it will be valuable, I believe, to give what at first sight may seem a disproportionate amount of attention to a small but influential book that Tom Wright has called 'a masterpiece',³⁶ namely, Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* (1979). Ben Meyer was a Roman Catholic scholar who, through long engagement with the work of Bernard Lonergan, introduced into historical Jesus studies the insights gained by 'critical realism', a school of thought in the area of cognitive theory, that is, the branch of philosophy that has to do with how we understand what we understand.

Ben Meyer's work has had a considerable influence upon Tom Wright, as Wright himself has graciously acknowledged.³⁷ In fact it is no exaggeration to say that Wright's two volumes on the historical Jesus can neither be fully understood nor properly evaluated without first gaining some grasp of Ben Meyer's prior work.

Beyond that, Meyer's contribution is also highly significant in its own right. Previous endeavours to recover the Jesus of history in the main depend on tools developed predominantly within the confines of New Testament scholarship itself, in particular, the criteria derived from form criticism (the mainstay of John P. Meier's *A Marginal Jew*) or research into how oral tradition in certain social settings can be handed down while maintaining substantial reliability (the foundation of Dunn's *Jesus Remembered*). But Ben Meyer, and Tom Wright after him, have developed an approach that stems from seeking to resolve the problems of historical research in a broader context and at a higher level. More particularly, they have drawn on insights gained from facing, and trying to resolve, the dilemma that while "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there"³⁸ historians, when they venture into such territory, cannot help bringing their own world with them.

34 I do not deal here with what has been termed the Neo-Liberal school of historical Jesus research: this is associated with the 'Jesus Seminar', and its main representatives include Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.

35 Both Wright and Dunn intend their volumes to become part of still larger projects: in each case a comprehensive investigation into the origins of the Christian faith.

36 In Wright's Introduction to the 2002 edition of Ben F. Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 9a.

37 N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1992, p. 61, n.35.

38 The opening sentence of J.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between* (1953).

Critical Realism and History

About a third of Ben Meyer's modest book is devoted to methodology. Two basic questions are addressed: 1) What is the nature of the historical task? and 2) What are the procedures required? As to the first question, Meyer is much indebted to R.G. Collingwood's, *The Idea of History* (1946). Collingwood saw history unfolding through the intentions and interactions of human agents: hence the need to get to 'the thought' of each key player in order to understand 'the inside' of the event; for example, to try and get to what lay behind Julius Caesar's defiance of Republican law in crossing the Rubicon.³⁹

But what are the right procedures for this task? Here Meyer draws on 'critical realism'. Critical realism is to be contrasted to both positivism and phenomenalism. Positivism is characteristic of the Enlightenment: there are objects out there waiting to be discovered and known just as they are, provided that clear sight and the necessary objectivity can be attained through identifying and repressing all 'prejudices'. The increasingly influential post-Enlightenment outlook encourages a more phenomenalist view. Here, the subject perceiving the object is very aware that what they see is mediated through the cultural, social and religious make-up of the seeing self, and so what is real for them is their own perception of what they think they see, not the object itself. Wright gives a homely illustration. The positivist is quite sure she is holding a mug of cocoa; the phenomenalist can only say she thinks there is something round, hard and warm in her hands, with what appears to be hot liquid inside.⁴⁰

The critical realist acknowledges that the object is perceived by a seeing self who may bring all manner of distortions to the seeing process, so that what is seen is not necessarily the same as how the object really is. To grasp the reality of the object, I may put forward various questions and apply tests to answer them. For example, let me suppose that in my hands there really is a mug of cocoa, as I suspect, then if I place my finger in it, it will feel hot, but in time it will gradually cool down; if I taste what seems to be inside, it will be sweet and sustaining; and so on.

So far as obtaining knowledge about the past is concerned, critical realism uses the method of question, hypothesis and verification. The framing of fruitful questions is the most difficult part of the process. Collingwood helpfully gives the analogy of the detective story, or at least one that follows the *Hercule Poirot* model, where not only apparently true statements have to be taken into account, but also those which may be, or will later be shown to be, false: such statements may nevertheless point to something significant. Imaginative questioning can lead to a hypothesis, which can then be either verified or disproved according to the available evidence but, in the process, some new piece of knowledge will have emerged.⁴¹

39 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 1946, p. 213.

40 Wright, *New Testament*, p. 34.

41 Collingwood, *Idea of History*, pp. 269-82. Collingwood illustrates the procedure by telling a short detective story of his own – see pp. 266-68.

The Pre-Understanding of Faith

There is, however, a dimension to the critical realism of Ben Meyer that goes beyond the bare methods and procedures of historical research. There is also the question of how we understand the things, the nature of which we are exploring. Here Meyer sets out the principle that underlies a spirit of historical inquiry marked by humility, personal encounter with God, and openness to receive new truth.

The ‘hermeneutical circle’, by which advances in understanding are gained, can be expressed by the dictum: “we understand words by understanding the things they refer to; we understand things by understanding the words that refer to them.”⁴² Here the initial movement begins with some pre-understanding of the things to which the words refer. Only then can some further understanding of those things be gained by words about them. As Luther declared, “he who does not understand the things cannot draw the sense from the words.”⁴³

Meyer argues that this pre-understanding in relation to questions of Jesus and history entails “the hearer’s total relationship – intellectual, moral and emotional – to the things expressed”. This is not a case of exercising faith at the cost of abandoning the intellect, but rather of “stepping out of the mastered, familiar world into the darkness where one is a child”,⁴⁴ that is, in humility, being willing to receive new truth. In ‘this vital relationship to the “thing” that comes to expression, there is something like a divine grace of access’.⁴⁵

The absence of such a vital relationship is exemplified by the 19th century lives of Jesus. The liberal theologians who authored them nurtured little personal hope of Jesus’ coming again, and so Jesus’ teaching about the last things was put to one side. Likewise, they could not envisage a Jesus who can enter our world in mighty saving acts; hence Jesus’ miracles had to be explained away.

But for the scholar who has faith and also seeks historical truth with integrity, there is a daunting challenge here. Meyer reflects:

*It already takes the exegete many years to assemble the tools of his trade. If he nevertheless wishes to go to the heart of the matter ... he is willy-nilly enlisted in time-consuming ventures that go still further.*⁴⁶

He goes on to explain that these ventures are motivated by the ‘dynamism of self-transcendence’,⁴⁷ that is, the willingness to respond to, and be moulded by, whatever new or deeper insights may be revealed. An analogy, I suggest, is that of the preacher on whom it has dawned, ‘The degree to which I can truly mediate the Word of God to this

42 Meyer, *Aims*, p. 96.

43 Meyer, *Aims*, p. 96.

44 Meyer, *Aims*, p. 97.

45 Meyer, *Aims*, p. 104.

46 Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 1989, p. 71.

47 Meyer, *Critical Realism*, p. 71.

congregation is ultimately limited by the degree to which I have advanced in knowing Jesus' (see Phil. 3:10-12).

The Aims of Jesus

In Meyer's own relatively short exploration of the Jesus of history, the principal concern is to identify the aims of Jesus, for they are 'the key to his historic selfhood'.⁴⁸ For Meyer these aims are the facts to be established, whereas the relevant data to be examined are the traditions relating to Jesus and John the Baptist; the traditions regarding Jesus' public ministry; and the traditions regarding His teaching of the disciples.

Meyer very rarely discusses the authenticity of these traditions, although in fact, for many of them, there can be little doubt about their historicity. The point is that for Meyer, these traditions are simply the data which at this point do not have to be shown to be authentic, but from which important leads may be given.⁴⁹

Foremost among these leads is the significance attached to Jesus' relationship with the mission of John the Baptist. Ben Meyer notes that Jesus 'significantly aligned himself in the closest possible way with the trajectory of the Baptist's mission'.⁵⁰ This leads to a presentation of Jesus as an 'eschatological prophet' similar to the Baptist, that is, as an Elijah-like figure warning of the imminent 'Day of the Lord' (Malachi 4:5-6) and proclaiming a restoration of a remnant of Israel through radical repentance.⁵¹ For Jesus it was the coming kingdom, or better 'reign', of God that was the focal point of His preaching. Under this broadly similar concept, the restoration of the remnant of Israel, later to embrace the nations too, is now seen pre-eminently as a gracious and powerful intervention by God Himself. This reign of God is already breaking in through Jesus' own ministry, being attested by His public actions: the calling of the Twelve; the performance of the miraculous signs of salvation; God's overwhelming grace demonstrated in Jesus' acceptance of the immoral and ritually unclean; the symbolic significance of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. Meyer's hypothesis thus becomes:

*In sum, once the national restoration in its full eschatological sweep is grasped as the concrete meaning of the reign of God, Jesus' career begins to become intelligible as a unity.*⁵²

The Jewish Religious Scene

In a section headed 'Confirmation'⁵³ Meyer now examines the Jewish setting in which Jesus

48 Meyer, Aims, p. 111.

49 Thus I consider John P. Meier misunderstands what Ben Meyer is setting out to achieve when he criticises him for including 'more and more of the redactional theology of the evangelists' as the book proceeds; see A Marginal Jew, Vol. I, p. 185, n. 2.

50 Meyer, Aims, p. 128.

51 The Baptist's ministry being 'in the wilderness' also picks up the prophetic promise of Israel's spiritual restoration in the wilderness (Hosea 2:14-23); see further Meyer, Aims, p. 118.

52 Meyer, Aims, p. 221.

53 Meyer, Aims, pp. 223-41.

operated, with a view to finding verification of this statement.

The immediate past that was still pervasive in the religious climate of Judaea, in the First century was characterised by the threat to the cult from the Hellenizers, the ensuing Maccabean revolt followed by the period of independence under the Maccabean and later Hasmonean rulers, and the emergence of the four religious parties described by Josephus, the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots.

But within this immediate past, Meyer finds still being worked out a fundamental sea-change that had taken place in Israelite/Jewish history, namely the evolution of an essentially ethnic community having its own, albeit all-supreme, god into a religious community conceived of as a remnant of a larger, but unfaithful, mass. The change can be traced through the warnings of the pre-exilic prophets and their promises of restoration of a remnant after judgement (for example Isaiah 6:9-13; Micah 4:6-8). Later, following the captivity in Babylon, the returning exiles under Ezra and Nehemiah saw themselves as such a remnant and in a drive for purity disassociated themselves from 'the people of the land', the Jews who had remained in the Land. In due course special characteristics were attached to the saved remnant. They were a people of saved sinners (Micah 7:18-20); they would be identified as 'a people humble and poor' (Psalm 149:4; Zephaniah 2:3, 3:11-13). It seems likely that during the post-exilic period some minority group or groups began to see themselves as the true remnant within Israel, going by such names as 'the lowly ones' or 'the pious'. Certainly by the time of the Maccabean revolt, there emerges a group called the Hassidim (pious) – see 1 Macc. 2:42, 7:12-14.

Each of the four religious parties active at the time of Jesus appears to originate from the time of the Maccabean revolt. The Zealots were a party dedicated to securing political and religious freedom for the Jews by force, so directly following the example of the Maccabees. The Sadducees and especially the Pharisees are likely to stem from the Hassidim who assisted in the revolt. Jesus does not seem to have engaged with the Essenes, but they too seem to have originated from the time of the Maccabees.

Although markedly different from each other, the common characteristic shared by each of these groups is the belief that they were the holy *remnant* of the people of God who had a special role in securing the *restoration* of Israel. Meyer argues that even the Sadducees (the party from which the High Priests were drawn under Roman rule) saw in the maintenance of the Temple cult the hope of liberation from Gentile rule and the realisation of the ideal kingdom of David; hence they too 'looked to the restoration of Israel'.⁵⁴

It can now be seen that the movements initiated by both John the Baptist and Jesus fit in with prevailing mood of the time, where the restoration of Israel through a holy remnant was a common expectation. What was distinctive about the Baptist's and Jesus' message was that the coming judgement of Israel was proclaimed as imminent and therefore a radical change of life was urged in preparation for that event.

Meyer finds further confirmation of his thesis in the texts emerging from the early

church. In particular, he notes that Paul in Romans 9:27-29, when grappling with the problem of the unbelief of the majority of the Jews, specifically invokes Isaiah's promise of a remnant that will survive (Isaiah 10:20-23). Again in Romans 11, in reply to the question 'Has God rejected his people?', Paul, referring to the remnant God spoke of to Elijah (1 Kings 19:18) begins his argument, "So too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace" (Romans 11:5).

Evaluation

Although quite short and compact in its argumentation, I consider Meyer's book makes a powerful case for seeing Jesus as an 'eschatological prophet', that is, one who both proclaimed and inaugurated a new era – the reign of God – in which only a remnant of Israel was to be saved.

The key point at which this depiction of Jesus conflicts with the Jewish Jesus appropriated by Jewish scholars, is that now Jesus, the eschatological prophet, did not simply come to *reform* the Judaism of His day, for example, by stressing the importance of internal attitudes as against maintaining external obedience; rather, like the great prophets of Israel's past, He exhorted the nation to repent in order to escape God's imminent judgement, at the same time foreseeing that only a remnant would heed the warning and the majority would be rejected. Hence Jesus' message was one that anticipated a radical division between those who would reject it and those who would respond positively. Those Jews in Jesus' day who rejected His message, the vast majority, would hardly have claimed Him as 'one of us', such as one of our sages, another Hillel or Shammai, or as 'one of our prophets like Isaiah or Micah of old'. But equally their successors, the contemporary Reform or Orthodox heirs of Rabbinic Judaism, cannot rightly make such claims either. If I am Jewish, Jesus is only 'a Jew like one of us' when I accept His message, acknowledge Him as Lord, and through receiving the Holy Spirit, become a member of 'the commonwealth of Israel', 'the new humanity' that Jesus has created through making 'both groups', that is Jewish and Gentile believers respectively, "one in Himself" (Ephesians 4:12-14).

Of course, this analysis of Jesus and His message is very difficult for Jewish people to accept, and tragically the contempt shown by Christians towards Jews down the centuries, and the suffering they have endured as a result, have aggravated the difficulty. Nevertheless, as I have sought to show, this Christian construal of Jesus rests on a sound scholarly basis.

But I am also very conscious that no one can be drawn to the Lord Jesus and become His follower simply by intellectual reasoning. There is a place for that in certain situations, but the willingness to respond to and be moulded by whatever new or deeper insights may be revealed, that Ben Meyer speaks of, applies not only to a calling to godly scholarship, but also to the predicament of every human soul when confronted by the challenge of Jesus and His call to follow Him. Here the grace to be sought earnestly is a willingness to obey, if insight as to the truth or otherwise of Jesus' message is granted. Jesus has promised that where such willingness is found, the truth will indeed be revealed:

Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own (John 7:17).

May the deep love and prayers of Jesus' followers touch many Jewish people who do not yet know Him, and move them to search out the truth for themselves!

In Part Two of this two-part article I hope to introduce and evaluate Tom Wright's much fuller account of Jesus that broadly follows the thesis set out by Ben Meyer. I will also consider the alternative approaches adopted by James Dunn and John P. Meier respectively. The former's treatment rests very much on the reliability of oral tradition handed on in certain social contexts; the latter's on the criteria stemming from form criticism, in this case producing a surprising full recovery of the historic Jesus.

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