

# IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SEMINARY

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

### A MARGINAL JEW - RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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I am immensely grateful to the School of Theology at Seton Hall for inviting me to speak to you about the historical Jesus, since the task of preparing this lecture sent me on a voyage of discovery that I would not otherwise have taken. When one of the organizers of the lecture innocently suggested that I speak on "A Marginal Jew - Retrospect and Prospect,"<sup>1</sup> it sounded like a straightforward enough assignment. And yet as I grappled with the task, I began to notice some things about my own book - and about the quest for the historical Jesus in general - that I have never fully understood. This evening I would like to share some of this voyage of discovery with you, by glancing back at what I have done so far and by looking forward to some questions I face in volume two of *A Marginal Jew*, which I hope to finish this summer.

#### 1. Retrospect

Let me begin with a retrospect of volume one of *A Marginal Jew*. As I look back on volume one, the great temptation would be to speak about what I intended to do, or in a more humble mode of what I failed to do. But such an approach would involve us in a painful sort of academic narcissism, a celebration of the author's ego falling just short of the kind of thing practiced by Norman Mailer.

Fortunately, there is a way of avoiding this trap of focusing solely on the "I" of the author and on that suspect entity, the author's intention. Books are not unlike children in that, once they start to grow, they often develop in ways and directions that their progenitors could have neither foreseen nor controlled. When I look back at volume one of *A Marginal Jew* about one year after its publication, the thing that strikes me the most is the surprises the book holds for its author, to say nothing of its readers. On second reading, volume one does a number of things I was not fully conscious of at the time I was writing the book. As so often in life, our intentions and achievements do not neatly coincide. Therefore, as a way of approaching this retrospect on *A Marginal Jew*, I will explore three areas in which the book took on a life of its own and struck out in directions the author may not have clearly intended at the beginning.

1. The first great surprise for me, as I revisited volume one, is how militantly untheological *A Marginal Jew* is. When I started the work, I don't think that I realized the full import of the method I announced on page one of the book: "...it (the book) prescind[s] from what Christian faith or later Church teaching says about Jesus, without either affirming or denying such claims." To make clear what I meant, I proposed the fantasy of the "unpapal conclave": a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew and an agnostic - all honest historians cognizant of first-century religious movements - are locked up in the bowels of the Harvard Divinity School library, are put on a spartan diet, and are not allowed to emerge until they hammer out a consensus document on Jesus of Nazareth, based purely on the methods of modern historical research as applied to ancient sources. This "white paper on Jesus" would have to be open in principle to verification by any and all competent scholars.

The result, of course, would be a narrow focus and a fragmentary vision, hardly a substitute for the Christ of faith. Yet something would have been accomplished. The document could serve as common ground, a starting point for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews, believers and nonbelievers alike.

Such was my starting point. It seemed simple enough at the time, and I think I have been fairly faithful to it. Yet it is this very starting point that has proved difficult for some Catholics, especially some Catholic theologians, to understand. Indeed, in certain cases it has moved some Catholic theologians to object to the basic rationale of the whole project.

When I stop to think about it now, I see that I shouldn't have been so surprised by the confusion or opposition volume one has met in some quarters. Without fully realizing it, in volume one I adopted a method that, in its rigor, broke with most recent attempts by Catholics to deal with the historical Jesus. The surprising fact is that, despite all the bows to the historical-critical method in quests for the historical Jesus, most Catholic authors still view the quest as one part of a theological project. Perhaps Bishop Walter Kasper was the most honest when he simply made the historical Jesus a section within his book on christology, *Jesus the Christ*.<sup>2</sup> I maintain that many other Catholic authors, however much they talk about a Jesus reconstructed by purely historical research,

actually conduct their search within the larger framework of a theological agenda. The historical Jesus is always wedded to a favored theological viewpoint or system that He is supposed to validate. In a curious way, these books remind one of those 1930s films like "Frankenstein Meets the Werewolf."

For instance, James Mackey's *Jesus the Man and the Myth* (1979) is basically Bultmann meets the historical Jesus. 3 Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* (1979) is basically Bernard Lonergan meets the historical Jesus.4 Hans Kung's *On Being A Christian* (German 1974; English translation 1976) is more like Hans Kung's agenda meets the historical Jesus.5 The most successful Catholic book taking this approach is probably Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus. an Experiment in Christology* (Dutch original 1974; English translation 1979).6 Significantly, Schillebeeckx explicitly makes the purpose of his book a movement (1) from the quest for the historical Jesus, (2) through a "theology of Jesus" developed from the quest, (3) to a christology. I suggest that Schillebeeckx does explicitly what many other quest-for-Jesus books do implicitly - i.e., use the historical Jesus to generate, mold, replace or at least supplement the theological presentation of Jesus Christ that we Christians call christology.

This theological use of the quest is quite understandable, especially for Catholics, who are relatively new to a rigorous quest for the historical Jesus and who are still prone to see the quest simply as a part of christology. It is not by accident that the original Jerome Biblical Commentary had no separate article on the historical Jesus. Instead, some topics that usually come under the quest are found in a general article entitled "Aspects of New Testament Thought."<sup>7</sup> This arrangement is not by chance, and it is not an isolated case. If anything, it is symptomatic of a larger problem.

In a nutshell, the problem is that it has been extremely difficult to wean Catholics away from the historical Jesus seen solely as part of a larger theological or christological enterprise. Yet I think that such weaning away is what must be done. It is not that I deny the usefulness of the historical Jesus to the project of constructing a present-day christology. Rather, I affirm such a project. But I think that the recent Catholic attempts I have mentioned show that a sketch of the historical Jesus is all too easily skewed or dictated by the larger theological agenda being pursued. I have become convinced - and *A Marginal Jew* reflects this conviction - that the quest for the historical Jesus must be conducted first as an autonomous historical project. Only after that project is completed, only as a second stage, can someone - perhaps someone different from the quester - take up the results of the quest and integrate them into a contemporary christology. Perhaps I might adapt a slogan of the neo-Scholastics: "Distinguish in order to unite." This, then, is where I disagree with some of my Catholic peers: the quest for the historical Jesus must, at least initially, be cordoned off as an autonomous project, apart from any larger theological endeavor.

I stress this point because here is where some Catholic colleagues either have a problem with my whole approach or perhaps do not understand it. For instance, an Australian theologian, a Redemptorist priest, Reverend Tony Kelly, has taken issue with the basic method I outline in chapter one of *A Marginal Jew*. His article, "The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity. A Response to John Meier," has been published in a relatively new Australian theological journal called *Pacifica*.<sup>8</sup> Underlying all of Father Kelly's individual objections to my method is an all-pervasive one, which becomes clear only toward the end of the article: Father Kelly approaches the quest for the historical Jesus as part of Christian theology, not as an autonomous historical project. As he pointedly states, the Jesus-quest is simply one phase of "faith seeking understanding," in other words, theology.

If I understand him correctly, Father Kelly draws the natural conclusion that a scholar who is not a Christian believer cannot undertake the quest properly. Such a scholar can produce only "a secularistic reduction, with no real meaning." One wonders how Kelly would explain the fine work of the Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner, whose *Jesus of Nazareth* is a Jesus-book that I would rate higher than many a Jesus-book from Christian pens.<sup>9</sup> Others might want to add books on Jesus by the Jewish scholars Geza Vermes and Jacob Neusner.<sup>10</sup> I would not brand any of these books - especially the work of Klausner - "a secularistic reduction with no real meaning." Yet Klausner's book would have to be excluded from the proper sort of quest for the historical Jesus, if Father Kelly's understanding of the quest were to be accepted as normative.

The very fact that Klausner - as well as other non-Christian scholars - have produced important books on Jesus-research suggests instead that there is something wrong with Kelly's narrowing of the quest to a project of Christian theology. De facto, some non-Christians do Jesus-research very well. That fact, and not a theologian's theory, should dictate the definition and understanding of the quest for the historical Jesus.

In summary, it is time for Catholics to cut the quest loose from the apron strings of Catholic theology or christology. Perhaps, without my fully realizing it at the time, that is what *A Marginal Jew* does. In light of Kelly's article, it is all the more important for me to stress that *A Marginal Jew* is not a theological tract in disguise;<sup>11</sup> indeed, it should not be. Possibly the major contribution of *A Marginal Jew* is a contribution I did not directly intend: it is militantly untheological, as every good quest for the historical Jesus should be - at least in its first phase.

As an aside, I might point out that, while my focus has been on Catholic authors, the same basic criticism could be made of many Protestant quests. From Reimarus and Schleiermacher through Bultmann and Dodd to Bornkamm and Kasemann, the quest for the historical Jesus, for all the battle-cries of historical criticism, has been largely a theological or anti-theological endeavor, trying to bring traditional Christian faith to confront the exigencies of rationalism, liberalism or existentialism. As with the Catholics, so with the Protestants: I do not object to such a critical correlation with theology. My objection is rather that it must be the second stage of a project that presupposes a first stage of autonomous historical investigation. The problem is that the first stage is usually not allowed its proper autonomy.

2. Let me move now from this basic methodological point to a more specific point in *A Marginal Jew* that turned out to be equally surprising in retrospect.

It was not my intention when I began *A Marginal Jew* to make the book a polemic against such distinguished scholars as Helmut Koester, John Dominic Crossan, James M. Robinson, Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar in general. In fact, I purposely tried to avoid making frequent global references to the Jesus Seminar, since the seminar includes scholars who would not always agree with the widely publicized results of the seminar's balloting on which sayings of Jesus are historical. Willy-nilly, though, especially as I came to treat the question of the Apocryphal Gospels, Nag Hammadi, and notably the Coptic Gospel

of Thomas as sources for the historical Jesus, Helmut Koester and like-minded scholars loomed large as dialogue partners. Koester's many articles on Nag Hammadi, plus his book *Ancient Christian Gospels*,<sup>12</sup> made it inevitable that I would often be addressing and disagreeing with his work, as well as with some of the leading figures of the Jesus Seminar.

The points of disagreement are many, and I need not rehearse all of them here. As an aside, I might note what I consider to be a major defect of Koester's approach. For all his talk about ancient Christian Gospels, Koester never adequately defines the literary genre of Gospel. Indeed, he almost seems to dismiss the question as unimportant. From that one fault stem many others that pervade his work.

But what has probably attracted the attention of the media and the public most of all is the tendency of Koester, Crossan, Funk and others to exalt the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter and other apocryphal works as sources for the historical Jesus. They are extolled as being just as reliable as, indeed in some cases as more reliable than, the canonical Gospels.<sup>13</sup> Time does not allow me to start arguing the case at length here. Suffice it to say that not only my presentation in volume one but also my work on individual sayings of Jesus in volume two of *A Marginal Jew* have convinced me that at least some of the sayings in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas do depend on the canonical Gospels. Especially intriguing are a number of cases where the Thomas sayings betray the redactional hand of Luke reworking Mark or Q. By the way, if you should like to see this view of Thomas' dependence on the canonical Gospels worked out at great length and detail, you might consult Michael Fiegener's recent work, *Das Thomasevangelium*, published in 1991.<sup>14</sup>

Behind all these individual arguments about the Coptic Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter lies, I think, a more basic question. Why, we might ask, are people like Koester or Funk so intent on proving some of the material in the Gospel of Thomas to be prior to and more reliable than the canonical Gospel specifically the Synoptics? Why does Koester, for example, consider any special treatment given the canonical Gospels as compared to the Apocryphal ones unbecomingly prejudiced?

I think that one of the leaders of the Jesus Seminar may have inadvertently articulated the unspoken reason for the exaltation of the Apocryphal Gospels in a private letter circulated among a number of scholars a few years ago. In the view of this leader of the Jesus Seminar, only by demoting the canon of the New Testament can one carry the true thrust of the Protestant Reformation to its logical conclusion. Such a claim, I imagine, would horrify many Protestants. And yet there is a strange sort of logic and consistency in this program. After all, it was the "early Catholicism" of the second century, seen for example in Ignatius of Antioch and later in Irenaeus of Lyons, that gave expression to the monarchical episcopate, a high estimation of the eucharist, and a special reverence for the church of Rome. But it was only the "late Catholicism" of the later patristic period of, say, the fourth century that fashioned a consensus around a fairly complete and stable canon of Scripture, in particular the canon of the New Testament. If many Protestants feel at least unease about the manifestations of early Catholicism like the monarchical episcopate and the prominence of the church of Rome, why should they not feel even more unease about the still later creation of the Catholic church, the canon of the New Testament?

If I understand the suggestion of this leader of the Jesus Seminar correctly, he reasons as follows: The Protestant Reformation began to dismantle the distortions of Catholicism produced by the patristic period. In various ways, and in varying degrees, various Protestant churches rejected the leadership of Rome, the monarchical episcopate, and a high theology of Christ's presence in the eucharist. But at one point the great Reformers were inconsistent. To justify their other actions, they held tenaciously to and constantly appealed to the canonical books of the New Testament, despite the fact that the normative canon of the New Testament was just as much a product of the Catholicism of the patristic period as was the monarchical episcopate. Indeed, it was a product of "late" Catholicism while many of the other phenomena were products of "early" Catholicism.

If one were to adopt this view, then it would easily follow that Koester, Crossan, Funk and others are only completing the work begun by the Reformers. With great logical rigor these contemporary scholars are simply junking the last great relic of patristic Catholicism left in the Protestant churches: the normative canon of the New Testament. Nag Hammadi and the Apocryphal Gospels prove to be convenient tools for getting rid of this last vestige of Catholicism.

Now, Christian theologians might well oppose this reformist program from the vantage point of Christian theology, but the Harvard-Clemont-Sonoma scholars would probably dismiss such objections as benighted prejudice and ecclesiastical dogmatism, unworthy of scholars arguing from empirical data. If one is working from a purely empirical, historical viewpoint, the exclusivity of the canon must fall and the Apocryphal Gospels be treated as of equal or greater importance.

This is where, perhaps unintentionally at the time of its composition, *A Marginal Jew* supplies a reply to this reformist program, simply on the basis of history. In effect, my book argues that this whole reformist program is wrong, not because it offends basic Christian faith, but simply because it is wrong about the empirical data and scholarly conclusions drawn from the data. A careful analysis of such works as the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter reveals that they depend on the canonical Gospels.

From a purely empirical point of view, therefore, these apocryphal works cannot be put on the same level as the canonical Gospels. Hence, even if we prescind from questions of Christian faith, the reformist program is to be rejected because the Coptic Gospel of Thomas and other apocryphal works do not contain the most ancient, independent gospel traditions that Koester, Funk and Crossan claim for them. Protestant theologians could no doubt continue to debate on theological grounds whether the normative canon of the New Testament is an illogical Catholic relic in the Protestant churches. But, if my arguments in *A Marginal Jew* are correct, Nag Hammadi cannot be used as the lever to move the canon out of the Protestant community. Needless to say, I did not write *A Marginal Jew* to make this point, but in effect the book winds up doing just that.

3. A third aspect of volume one that I did not appreciate sufficiently at the time has become much more important to me as I worked through the material

of volume two. I refer to the whole question of the criteria of historicity that I lay out in chapter six of volume one. As I observed when I treated the criteria there, it is strange how fine scholars will discuss the criteria at great length in the introductory sections of their books, only to forget the criteria when they come to judge the individual sayings and deeds of Jesus in the body of their work. A prime example of this is Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*. About the first third of this book is taken up with methodological questions, and it is a very fine survey of the problem. However, once the Gospel material is directly engaged, the criteria seem to recede from view, and a good deal of the redactional theology of Mark, Matthew and Luke is discovered in the mouth of the historical Jesus. I began to wonder at this point whether the criteria did serve as an effective hedge against rampant subjectivism, if such projection could occur even in a careful book like Ben Meyer's.

I am glad to report that my experience in writing volume two has answered that question in the affirmative. Indeed, writing volume two has shown me that my chapter on criteria was much more vital to my project than I suspected at the time. This became especially clear to me in chapter 15 of volume two, as I struggled with the question of whether the historical Jesus predicted the definitive coming of the kingdom of God in the near future.

As you may know, some members of the Jesus Seminar have rejected any element of imminent future eschatology in Jesus' message in favor of Jesus the cynic philosopher or Jesus the magician. One finds both tendencies in John Dominic Crossan's new book, *The Historical Jesus*. It is against this tendency that I devote a whole chapter to key sayings of Jesus that meet the test of the criteria and that speak of an imminent future coming of the kingdom. Examples include (1) the petition "Thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6: 10 par.); (2) the Last Supper tradition in which Jesus announces that he will no longer drink wine until the arrival of the kingdom (Mark 14:25 par.); (3) the promise that many will come from the east and the west and sit down at table with the patriarchs in the kingdom (Matt 7:11-12 par.) and (4) the various future promises in the Q beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12 par.).

However, as I proceeded through this chapter on future eschatology, I imagined that my trump card, my most weighty proof, would be the three sayings in which Jesus sets a time limit for the coming of the kingdom within the present generation:

Matt 10:23: "You shall not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

Mark 9:1: "There are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power."

Mark 13:30: "This generation shall not pass away until all these things come to pass."

I approached these three sayings presupposing that at least some of them were authentic, since the criterion of embarrassment would seem to argue that later Christians would not have placed an erroneous prophecy in Jesus' mouth. It all seemed so simple, a sure proof that Jesus predicted an imminent coming of the kingdom. But then I started applying all the criteria with care, attending as well to (1) the placement of the three sayings in the larger redactional contexts of each Gospel and to (2) the striking parallels with texts in Paul's Epistles. Like my three prize sayings, certain texts in Paul also deal with the problem of some Christians dying while others remain alive within the first generation, notably 1 Thess 4:15 and I Cor 15:51.

In the end, sadder but wiser, I had to throw over my three prize Synoptic proof texts and conclude that these three sayings are most likely the products of first-generation Christian prophets, speaking words of encouragement, consolation and possibly threat to those first-generation Christians who are seeing some of their brothers and sisters die before the parousia and who start wondering what the fate of the living as well as the dead will be as time drags on without the parousia occurring. The remarkable thing here is that I went into my treatment of these three sayings convinced of one position and came out convinced of the opposite. The good news is that the criteria of historicity, when applied carefully to the data, do have the power to turn the smug critic around 180 degrees. On the whole, I feel more confident about the criteria now than when I listed them in chapter eight of volume one.

## II. Prospect

Let's move from retrospect to prospect. Volume one of *A Marginal Jew* is largely programmatic. It lays out the problem of the historical Jesus, the method to be used to meet the problem, the statements that can be made with fair certitude about Jesus' origins, development and cultural background, and finally a rough chronological grid of his life. With this setting volume one ends.

Volume two, which begins to grapple directly with the words and deeds of Jesus during his public ministry, is divided into three main sections: mentor, message and miracles.

1. The first section, "mentor," focuses on the one person who had the greatest single influence on Jesus' ministry, namely, John the Baptist. All too often in books on the historical Jesus, the Baptist gets a perfunctory nod and short shrift. Yet one of the most certain things we know about Jesus is that he voluntarily submitted himself to John's baptism for the remission of sins, an embarrassing event each evangelist tries to neutralize in his own way. But the Baptist is not so easily neutralized. For all the differences between John and Jesus, some key elements of John's preaching and praxis flowed into Jesus' ministry like so much baptismal water. Hence, not to understand the Baptist results in not understanding Jesus - a dictum borne out in the work of some of the scholars in the Jesus Seminar.

To counter act the tendency to play down John's influence, I have devoted the first two chapters of Volume two to the Baptist. The first chapter, chapter twelve in the total work, is called "John without Jesus: the Baptist in His Own Rite." Here, with the help of Josephus as well as the Gospels,<sup>15</sup> I try to understand the ministry, preaching, baptism and death of John apart from any relationship he may have had to Jesus. Especially when writing for Christians accustomed to the Gospel presentations, any scholar must struggle to inculcate the picture of the Baptist as an independent Jewish prophet possessing his

own importance and meaning, prior to any connection with Jesus.

The picture of the Baptist that emerges is that of a first-century Jewish prophet proclaiming an eschatological message with some apocalyptic traits. John announced an imminent, fiery judgment that was about to break in on Israel, a judgment against which sinful Israel could protect itself only by inner repentance, by the concrete reform of one's exterior life, and by the acceptance of a once-and-for-all baptism administered by John himself. In his penitential practice, in his use of a water ritual, and in his implicit critique of the temple and its institutions as the way of pleasing God and obtaining forgiveness, John has some characteristics in common with other Jewish penitential figures of the time in the region of the Jordan valley, notably with the Jewish sectarians at Qumran.

But the Qumran connection, especially the romantic picture of John being raised in a prep school in the Judean desert, can be overdone. Certain traits mark John off from Qumran, and indeed from most other forms of Judaism in first-century Palestine. These traits include a once-and-for-all baptism tied to his own person (so tied to him that it gave him his second name), his outreach to all Israel without differentiation and without concern for detailed questions of legal observance or the creation of a new sectarian community within Judaism, and his apparent lack of concern about the future of the Jerusalem temple, however purified and restored.

What specifically John awaited in the near future by way of judgment and salvation is hard to say. He speaks of the coming of some figure superior to himself, a "stronger one," who will baptize with the holy spirit as opposed to John's mere water ritual. But whether the stronger one is an angelic or human figure, a heavenly "Son of Man" or an earthly Messiah, or simply God himself is unclear. Perhaps the vague language indicates that John's prophecy remained unclear to John himself.

Whatever the details of John's message, he had - as Josephus indicates - a broad and deep impact on the Jews of his day, so much so that Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, thought it best to remove him by a "preemptive strike," lest his influence on the people be used for seditious purposes. As Josephus makes clear, any idea of revolt lay in Herod's ever-suspicious brain, not in John's message and deeds.

It was to this eschatological prophet with his unique baptism that Jesus of Nazareth pledged adherence in the Jordan river somewhere around A.D. 28. I take up the relationship of John and Jesus in chapter 13, entitled "Jesus with and without John." That Jesus accepted John's baptism and thus presumably his message made him at least in some broad sense a disciple of John. Further hints in the Gospels, especially the Fourth Gospel, suggest that Jesus may have stayed for a while in the inner circle of John's disciples. At some point, however, Jesus left the circle of John, perhaps with some of John's erstwhile disciple to pursue a ministry of his own.

The precise relationship between Jesus' former attachment to the Baptist and his new independent ministry has been debated recently, with scholars adoptin extreme positions at both ends of the spectrum. Hendrikus Boers, for instance, stresses the perduring links between John and Jesus. According to Boers, Jesus continued to see John, and not himself, as the decisive, pivotal figure, the final eschatological figure before the coming of God's kingdom." John did not point to Jesus; Jesus pointed to John as the central human figure at the climax of salvation history. At the other end of the spectrum, Paul Holienbach speaks of Jesus' "apostasy" from John.<sup>17</sup> Supposedly Jesus at first continued John's practice of baptizing along with his message of an imminent fiery judgment. But at a certain point Jesus shifted to a message of God's mercy present now, and accordingly the practice of baptism gave way to the practice of exorcism and healing.

Actually, in order to create their simplistic scenarios, both of these extremes ignore part of the complex data of the Gospels. Sayings that contradict a particular theory are abruptly declared to be inauthentic, and Hollenbach creates different time periods in Jesus' ministry with no firm foundation in the Gospel text. To be more precise: I think that the Fourth Gospel is probably historically correct when it indicates that Jesus imitated John's practice of baptizing. This is a valuable point of contact between John and Jesus, a point either forgotten or suppressed by the Synoptics. More importantly still, contrary to what Hollenbach supposes, there is no reason to think that Jesus ever gave up the practice of baptizing once he started it. It is likely that the practice of baptizing flowed like water from John through Jesus into the early church, with the ritual obviously taking on different meanings at each stage of the process.

Since Jesus did move the emphasis of his preaching from God's imminent fiery judgment to the offer of God's mercy, baptism as a graphic symbol for extinguishing the fire to come naturally receded into the background of Jesus' own ministry. Still, for all the emphasis on God's mercy and forgiveness, experienced now in Jesus' hearings, Jesus never gave up John's proclamation of a future coming of God in judgment, a coming close at hand. Indeed, a Baptist with a message of future eschatology on one side of Jesus and a church with a message of future eschatology on the other side of Jesus makes a Jesus totally bereft of future eschatology a suspicious figure from the start. This poses a serious problem for the whole approach of Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, both who want to do away with the future eschatology in Jesus' preaching.<sup>18</sup> No matter how much Jesus moved beyond John, he always carried a great deal of his former master with him. In a sense, Jesus never was without John.

2. All this talk about eschatology brings us to the second major section of volume two, namely, "message." It is taken for granted that at the heart of Jesus' message lay the key symbol "kingdom of God"<sup>19</sup> that, when writing volume two, I purposely tried at first to see whether I could challenge that assumption. In an initial probe of the material I attempted to show that "kingdom of God" was either mostly a linguistic relic preserved from early Judaism before Jesus or a key element of early Christian preaching read back into Jesus' message. Interestingly, no matter how much I tried to pursue this revisionist argument in chapter 14, which investigates the term "kingdom of God," I could not make such a subversive theory work, and so I abandoned it. The facts point too much in the opposite direction. While the dynamic symbol of God assuming his powerful rule over a rebellious creation is found in various parts of the Old Testament, in the pseudepigrapha, and at Qumran, the precise phrase "kingdom of God" is extremely rare prior to Jesus, especially when used in a context

of imminent future eschatology.

Yet we see an explosion of the use of this set phrase as a central symbol in the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Such a way of speaking does not seem to be retrojected from early Christian usage, since the phrase "kingdom of God" is relatively rare in Paul, all but disappears in John, and is simply absent from certain New Testament books. The only logical conclusion is that the historical Jesus quite consciously chose an unusual phrase to be the enigmatic vessel, the "tensive symbol" of his complex message about God's rule and kingdom.

Two basic tendencies, again at the two ends of the spectrum, can be detected in recent research on kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. As we have already seen, some members of the Jesus Seminar, notably Crossan and Borg, claim that Jesus spoke only of the kingdom as present in his ministry or alternately, as universally present in human experience for those who have the eyes to see. A gnostic tone is easy to discern here. All references to an eschatological future kingdom are judged to come from the early church. On the contrary, in his highly praised book *Jesus and Judaism*, E. P. Sanders maintains that Jesus spoke clearly only of an imminent future coming of the kingdom. Sanders denies that any of the authentic sayings clearly proclaims the kingdom as already present in Jesus' ministry.<sup>20</sup>

Once again, I think the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. The massive number of sayings of Jesus that speak of a future kingdom, some of which I have already mentioned and which I judge authentic, make it very difficult to eliminate all future references in the teaching of the historical Jesus. Even if one completely omits the sayings connected with the mysterious Son of Man, evidence for future eschatology in Jesus' teaching is abundant. This is my point in chapter 15.

At the same time, Jesus does seem both to proclaim in his words and to dramatize by his deeds that in some sense "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21). Especially significant is the key saying in Q by which Jesus interprets his practice of exorcism: "If by the finger of God I cast out demons, the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20 par.). Sanders strives at great length to avoid the obvious consequence of this authentic saying. But, as I try to show in chapter 16, along with a number of other logia, it definitely speaks of God's kingdom as already present, however proleptically and imperfectly, in the ministry of Jesus, especially in his exorcisms and hearings.

Recently some critics have objected that a kingdom both future and present is an intolerable contradiction in terms. One might reply that the Semitic minds behind a good part of our biblical literature were not overly troubled by our Western philosophical principle of noncontradiction. But more to the point, the kingdom of God is a tensive symbol that encapsulates a dynamic event, a whole mythic drama of God coming in power to conquer his enemies and establish his definitive rule in Israel. A static kingdom of God understood as a set place or a set state of affairs could not be both present and yet coming. But the kingdom of God as a dynamic mythic drama does allow for a coming in stages, with strategic battles already won, yet the final victory still to come.

3. As we have just seen, one of the striking manifestations of God's kingly rule already present in Jesus' ministry was Jesus' practice of exorcisms, hearings and other miracles. The topic of Jesus' message of the kingdom naturally leads us to Jesus' praxis of the kingdom in miracle working. The thorny and complicated question of miracles takes up the third major section of volume two.

In chapter 17 I deal briefly with the theoretical problem of miracles in both the modern and ancient world. While I review in passing the modern objections against miracles from philosophy and science, writing an apologetic in defense of belief in miracles is not my real concern. My major point is that a decision such as "God has worked a miracle in this particular healing" is actually a theological, not a historical judgment. A historian may examine claims about miracles, reject those for which there are obvious natural explanations, and record instances where he can find no natural explanation. Beyond that a purely historical judgment cannot go.

Just as a historian rejects credulity, so a historian must reject an apriori affirmation that miracles do not or cannot happen. Even more so must the historian reject the unsubstantiated - indeed, the disproved - claim made by Bultmann and his disciples that "modern man cannot believe in miracles." Simply as an empirical fact of the social sciences, a Gallup survey in 1989 showed that about 82 percent of present-day Americans, presumably modern men and women, do accept the proposition that even today God works miracles.<sup>21</sup> Bultmann and friends cannot tell me what modern man cannot do when I have empirical sociological data that modern man does it.

As for the ancient problem of miracles, authors like Morton Smith, David Aune and John Dominic Crossan have raised a sharp challenge to traditional Christian views.<sup>22</sup> According to these scholars, who use both ancient Greco-Roman texts and the modern social sciences to bolster their positions, there is no real, objective difference between miracles and magic. "Magic" is simply the pejorative label polemicists stick on the miracles of their religious adversaries. In other words, my religious heroes perform miracles, while your religious heroes work magic.

While this approach has at first glance the appeal of scientific objectivity and evenhandedness, things are not so simple. I tend to agree with those anthropologists who see miracle and magic as two ideal types at the two ends of the spectrum of religious experience. At one end of the spectrum, the idea type of magic involves the elements of (1) automatic power possessed by a magician (2) in virtue of secret formulas and rituals, with (3) the resultant coercion of the divine powers by humans (4) in search of quick solutions to practical problems. Also, magic is usually marked by (5) a spirit of individualism or entrepreneurship as opposed to a perduring community of faith.

At the other end of the spectrum, miracle belongs in general to a context (1) of faith in a personal God to whose will one submits one's own will in prayer, (2) a perduring community of belief, and (3) a public manifestation of God's power (4) that is not dependent on a set ritual or formula. These, of course, are ideal types at the two ends of the spectrum; concrete cases will often float somewhere in between. For instance, the collections of Greek magical papyri were

have from the Greco-Roman period regularly reflect the ideal type of magic, though at times elements of prayer and humble supplication appear. Similarly, most of the Gospel hearings of Jesus tend toward the miracle end of the spectrum, though some, like the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage, have elements of the magical. In short, I do not think that the collapse of miracle and magic into one undifferentiated phenomenon is helpful or does justice to the complexity of the data. Hence I do not agree with Smith's and Crossan's characterization of Jesus as a Jewish magician. Miracle worker is a more helpful and neutral category, and if Crossan and Aune wish to put Apollonius of Tyana into that same neutral category, they are welcome to do so.

In chapter 18, the final chapter of volume two, I finally come to a treatment of Jesus' own miracles. The chapter falls into two parts. In the first, I use the criteria of historicity to establish the global assertion that, during his public ministry, Jesus claimed to work miracles, that Jesus was thought to work miracles by his contemporaries, friends and foes alike, and that Jesus did indeed do extraordinary deeds that his adversaries could explain only by claiming that he was in league with demonic powers. In other words, the attempt to see the miracle tradition of the Gospels purely as the creation of early Christian missionary propaganda is a fallacy of certain form critics, a fallacy that suffers shipwreck on the shoals of the criteria of historicity, especially the criterion of the multiple attestation of sources and forms. A completely non-miraculous Jesus is the creation of Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Jefferson and is a prime example of recasting a first-century Jewish prophet to fit the sensibilities of a modern intellectual elite.

That much, I think, is clear. Things become much more murky when I begin the second part of the chapter, a complete inventory of the miracle stories in a four Gospels. Here judgments of historicity are extremely hazardous. The best one can do, I think, is to distinguish those stories that are most likely creations of the early church from those stories that claim to go back in some form to the historical Jesus, however much they may have been reworked by later Christian preaching.

The results of applying the criteria of historicity to make this distinction are sometimes surprising and not always what I would have expected or even wanted. For instance, in my opinion, behind the bizarre story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5 does lie an exorcism that Jesus performed in the Decapolis district of Gerasa. Yet the beautiful story of the Syrophenician woman begging Jesus for the exorcism of her daughter seems most likely to be an early Christian creation intent on symbolizing the relation of Jews and Gentiles in the Christian mission. Such judgments, I admit, are highly debatable. What they underline is a basic point hammered home throughout volume two: the only way to reach even probable judgments is lengthy analysis of the data and painstaking application of the criteria of historicity. If volume two goes on at great length with such argumentation, it is because I have come to realize that the judgments of historicity found in Jesus books like those of Gunther Bornkamm are surprisingly lacking in detailed argumentation.<sup>23</sup> Bornkamm will settle the question of the authenticity of a saying in a few sentences, when pages of careful reasoning are called for. If nothing else, volume two does not suffer from the amnesia of those Jesus books that lay out the criteria of historicity only to forget them when treating individual sayings.

Obviously, a great deal of material remains to be treated in volume three: Jesus' disciples and his incipient community of disciples, including women, gathered at table fellowship, his relation to various Jewish groups and the Mosaic Law, his parables, the various titles and designations he may have used for himself, his view of the possibility that he might suffer a violent death, and finally his passion and crucifixion. Both scholars and lay people may be surprised that the parables of Jesus are kept so late "in the game," but I think the usual method of treating the parables early on as one of the most assured entrance ways into Jesus' teaching is questionable. Recent literary approaches to the parables have stressed the autonomous value of each parable as a piece of verbal artistry and have emphasized the ambiguity or multivalent nature of the parables when examined apart from their Gospel contexts. These studies have shown how the parables, taken individually and out of context, can be made to mean almost anything or nothing, depending on the skill and manipulation of the given interpreter.

The individual pieces of verbal art we call parables mean something definite only when they are set firmly within particular frames and particular contexts. Hence I think that it is only after we have determined with fair certitude the overall message and praxis of Jesus apart from his major parables that the parables should then be introduced. The already established overarching framework of Jesus' words and deeds will help us to determine what the parables mean-or perhaps better, intimate or hint at. Even in a firm historical context, the parables remain middle-speech with the possibility of more than one meaning. But at least the range of meanings will be somewhat clarified and delimited.

As for Jesus' passion and death, I suspect that by the time I reach the end of volume three I will be greatly aided by a massive work entitled *The Death of the Messiah*, soon to be published by Reverend Raymond Brown from Doubleday. Just as I was able to condense the endless problems of the Infancy Narratives into one chapter of volume one, thanks to Brown's *Birth of the Messiah*,<sup>24</sup> so I hope to profit from his *Death of the Messiah* by sending the reader to the master for questions of detail and further treatments of secondary issues. I might add here as an aside that Brown's huge two-volume *Death of the Messiah* will make Crossan's cool dismissal of almost all the questions involved in the Gospel Passion Narratives look even more curious than it does today.<sup>25</sup> One reason why Crossan does not treat the historical questions surrounding the passion in detail is his highly questionable view that all of the canonical Passion Narratives depend directly or indirectly on the primitive form of the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, itself a product of Christian midrash.<sup>26</sup> Another reason, I suspect, is that Crossan's picture of Jesus the Jewish magician who spun out parables at meals open to all does not really explain why Jesus wound up condemned by Caiaphas and Pilate and affixed to a Roman cross. A depiction of the historical Jesus that cannot explain the ending of the story, the passion and death, cannot meet the ultimate criterion of historicity, the criterion of Jesus' final fate - and, in my opinion, Crossan's Jesus does not.

Let me hasten to add, though, that I am not claiming that my portrait of the historical Jesus is either complete or definitive. Historical and philological research, scholarly debate, the discovery of new texts, and the unearthing of new archaeological finds did not come to an end with the publication of volume one of *A Marginal Jew*. One need only think of the supposed discovery of the tomb of Caiaphas' family outside of Jerusalem. In true Heraclitus-fashion, history - including the history of research - flows on. All any author can try to do is to present the best synthesis of up-to-date data and careful reasoning that is possible at a given moment. If my own attempt stimulates further thought and investigation, and especially if it aids interchurch and interfaith dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect, then the result, however limited, will have been worth the effort.

## Endnotes

- The "retrospect" refers, of course, to my book *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991).
- Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1976).
- James P. Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth* (New York: Paulist, 1979).
- Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).
- Hans Kung, *Christ sein* (Sixth ed.; Munich: Piper, 1975); the English translation is *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976).
- Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende* (Third ed.; Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1975); the English translation is *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979).
- Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 2. 768-99. The same editors have produced *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990). On pp. 1316-28, my article on the historical Jesus, entitled simply "Jesus," can be found.
- Tony Kelly, "The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity. A Response to John Meier," *Pacifica* 4 (1991) 292-28. I dwell on Reverend Kelly's presentation, since I think it is one of the most carefully developed critiques of my work that I have found. Other critiques include Roch Kereszty, "Historical Research, Theological Inquiry, and the Reality of Jesus: Reflections on the Method of J. P. Meier," *Communio* 19 (1992) 574-600. What I say about the tendency of some theologians to think of the quest for the historical Jesus only as a subdivision of christology holds true for Reverend Kereszty's article as well. Matters are not helped by misrepresentations of my position by Kereszty's essay, including a misquotation from my article on the historical Jesus in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (contrast the "quotation" in Kereszty's article. top of p. 579. with what I actually say in my "Jesus" article, p. 1328).
- Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth. His Life, Times and Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).
- Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); and *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Among the voluminous works of Jacob Neusner, see *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
- This seems to be a constant fear of Martin Goodman in his review of *A Marginal Jew* in *The Sunday New York Times Book Review* of December 22, 1991. Goodman's major problem, though, is that he never quite gets over his dislike - and misunderstanding - of the title so as to review the substance of the book.
- Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels. Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990).
- See Robert Funk, *The Gospel of Mark. Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1991) 15-16; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).
- Michael Fieger, *Das Thomasevangelium* (NTAbh 22; Mijster: Aschendorff, 1991).
- Josephus describes the ministry and fate of John the Baptist in his work *The Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2 1 16-19. For an examination of the structure and content of the passage, see John P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Josephus: Philology and Exegesis," *JBL* III (1992) 225-37.
- See Hendrikus Boers, *Who Was Jesus? The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) xiii-xiv.
- Paul W. Hollenbach, "The Conversion of Jesus: From Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1982) 11/25.1., 196-219.
- Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*.
- For initial orientation in this vast question, see, e.g., Bruce D. Chilton (ed.), *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Issues in Religion and Theology 5; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Wendell Willis (ed.), *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987); Benedict T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History* (Good News Studies 27; Wilmington, Delaware: Glazier, 1988).
- E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 123-24 1.
- George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion. American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier, 1989) 58; see also pp. 4, 56 and 119. See also George Gallup Jr. and Sarah Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1989) 10.
- Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); David E. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 11/23.2 (1980) 1507-57; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 137-67, 303-32.
- Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).
- Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977).
- Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 354-94.
- For the full defense of this position, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). In my view, the convoluted theory presented here ultimately fails to convince.