

“In Quest of the Historical Jesus”
January 28, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
Our truth partial,
And our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting
To break into our hearts and minds,
To enlighten our common path,
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

Introduction to Responsive Reading

I will be speaking this morning about the current research on what can be known of the life and thought of Jesus of Nazareth. What can be known of his life and thought has recently been made more interesting because of certain documents discovered in Egypt, the most interesting of all being a whole new gospel found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, written in Coptic, called The Gospel of Thomas.

It was previously known that such a gospel existed from the writings of opposing groups, but now here it was, a gospel consisting of 114 sayings – no narrative at all, just teachings – that were purported to have been spoken by Jesus.

But how much do these sayings represent the ideas of Jesus and how much do they belong to the ideas of those who came after him? That is what scholars try to figure out not only about this gospel but about the other gospels as well. And they make their determinations by comparing the different gospel accounts as well as through other information they have of the of Jesus.

In the case of the Gospel of Thomas, a number of scholars believe that some of these sayings are as close to Jesus’ words and ideas as anything in the biblical gospels, even in some cases being earlier versions of certain biblical sayings and parables.

Our responsive reading this morning consists of a selection of these sayings:

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.

CONGREGATION: Jesus said, "Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Don't you understand that the one who made the inside is also the one who made the outside?"

MINISTER: Jesus said, "You see the sliver in your friend's eye, but you don't see the timber in your own eye. When you take the timber out of your own eye, then you will see well enough to remove the sliver from your friend's eye."

CONGREGATION: Jesus said, "I have cast fire upon the world, and look, I'm guarding it until it blazes."

MINISTER: Jesus said, "No prophet is welcome on his home turf; doctors don't cure those who know them."

CONGREGATION: Jesus said, "If two make peace with each other in a single house, they will say to the mountain, 'Move from here!' and it will move."

MINISTER: Jesus said, "From Adam to John the Baptist, among those born of women, no one is so much greater than John the Baptist that his eyes should not be averted. But I have said that whoever among you becomes a child will recognize the kingdom and will become greater than John."

CONGREGATION: Jesus said, "The person old in days won't hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life, and that person will live. For many of the first will be last, and will become a single one."

MINISTER: Jesus said, "Congratulations to those who go hungry, so the stomach of the one in want may be filled."

CONGREGATION: Jesus said, "If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather, give it to someone from whom you won't get it back."

MINISTER: His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."

(Sayings 3, 89, 26, 10, 31, 48, 46, 4, 69, 95, 113 from the "Scholars' Translation" of the Gospel of Thomas, translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer)

A Time for All Ages

In the last two weeks you children have seen both Mahatma Gandhi and George Washington. Both of these individuals are great heroes – persons who have done remarkable things, so that many people look up to them.

But nobody thinks that either Gandhi or George Washington were more than human. They were simply humans who did great things, but really they are no different than you and me.

Now this week I will be speaking to your parents and the other adults about another hero whose name is Jesus of Nazareth. But with Jesus, there are many people who believe that he was more than human. Many people believe he was also God or the Son of God.

Now most of the persons who study these things – scholars, we call them – don't think that Jesus himself ever thought he was other than a human being. That would have been something very strange for a person of the Jewish religion to think, and Jesus was a person who was part of the Jewish religion many, many centuries ago.

But, as I say, later on Jesus was believed to be different than you and me, someone more than human.

However, most persons in our fellowships and churches, think of Jesus as a human being, someone who was a teacher or a prophet.

And what he taught about was the Kingdom of God, which is a time and place where the God of Israel would reign and where there would be love, justice, and peace on earth, not only for his own people of Israel but also for others in the world.

But the question many scholars wonder about is this: Did Jesus think this kingdom of love, justice, and peace was something that God would bring into the world in a miraculous way; or was this kingdom of love, justice and peace something that people had to bring in through their own actions and efforts?

So that is part of what I will be talking with your parents about this morning. And to find out what the answer, you will have to ask your parents after the service today.

Off you go, now, to your classes.

Introduction to Reading

The speakers in our January Series these past two weeks have portrayed two heroes in our world: the first, Mahatma Gandhi, the great twentieth century apostle of non-violent resistance, whose teaching so influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.; and the second, the great eighteenth century American revolutionary hero, George Washington.

In keeping with this theme of exploring heroes, this morning I undertake to examine – though not portray, as Bernard Meyer and James Hodges have done with Gandhi and Washington – to examine the most well-known hero of the Western world in the last two thousand years, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, of course, is not a modern or even a relatively modern hero like a Gandhi or George Washington, and, so far as we know, he did not write anything like these other heroes. (Actually, scholars are not agreed on whether Jesus could write, like the Apostle Paul, for example.) So, on both these accounts – both in terms of distance in time and the absence of his own writings – it is more difficult to get at him historically.

Further, since Jesus has been received within the orthodox Christianity as part of the Godhead itself, a greater halo has been thrown around him than most heroes, making the task of exploring him as a person in history more difficult.

From the beginning of such historical studies of Jesus in the late-eighteenth century, historians have had to fight for the right to even examine Jesus as an historical figure, even though such studies were initially undertaken to strengthen not dilute faith. Many persons, still today, consider such an investigation to be an “unholy task,” and perhaps understandably so, since it relates to concerns at the core of one’s religious identity. Indeed, many who have undertaken such a study have found their faith, their life-stance, profoundly altered. I count myself among those.

So where have the studies of the historians with respect to the “historical Jesus” brought us? That is what I will be exploring and summarizing for you this morning. It’s a huge field, so I will only be trying to summarize the most essential aspects of this search.

Let me begin, then, by reading a number of verses from the Gospel of Mark, followed by some verses from the Gospel of Matthew. My reason for reading these particular verses will, I hope, become apparent in my sermon.

Reading

First, the opening fifteen verses of the Gospel of Mark:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight –”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins....

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down

and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

(Mark 1:1-15)

And also these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark:

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out his angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

(Mark 13:24-27)

And these words of Jesus:

“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

And he said to them [his disciples], “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power.”

(Mark 8:38-9:1)

And also some verses from the Gospel of Matthew not found in the Gospel of Mark:

Jesus said unto them [his disciples], “Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

(Matthew 19:28)

And finally this from the Gospel of Matthew at the death of Jesus:

And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints

who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

(Matthew 27:50-54)

IN QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

“Jesus” and “Christ”

What is the quest of the “historical Jesus”?

It’s the attempt to discover what, if anything, can be known of the life and thought of Jesus. What were the ideas and events of the age in which he lived and what was his personal background? What were his beliefs, ideals, goals, and sense of mission? What was his self-consciousness?

The quest for the historical Jesus begins with a very important distinction: the distinction between the “Christ of faith” and the “Jesus of history.”

“Christ” – which is not Jesus’ last name, though often so used – is a Greek word for the Hebrew, “Messiah,” meaning “anointed.” It was a title bestowed on Jesus in a similar way that the title “Buddha,” meaning “enlightened one,” was bestowed on Siddhartha Gautama.

The “Christ of faith,” thus, has to do with the use made of Jesus’ life and teachings, whereas the “Jesus of history” has to do with the attempt to determine who Jesus was in his time and place.

And let me briefly editorialize to say that I don’t wish to pit the “Jesus of history” against the “Christ of faith” or the “Christ of faith” against the “Jesus of history.” They are simply very different enterprises.

Typically, a religion uses an historical figure as a jumping off place for the imagination and the life of the human spirit, a touchstone for meeting the needs of the psyche and for dealing with the various concerns of one’s own time and place. Thus, many aspects of a given religion may have only the slightest ties to the history of its founder or its central figure. I don’t regard this as necessarily a bad thing; it’s simply part of the way life moves on.

For example, I thoroughly enjoy the celebrations of Christmas and Easter and find great value in working with the various dimensions of our humanity that can be explored at these times. But I don’t imagine that these seasonal celebrations have much at all to do with the “historical Jesus.”

I found it interesting paging through our hymnal this past week as I was selecting hymns for today’s service: I realized there are very few that relate much at all to what I think of

as the “Jesus of history.” Most of them, such as the Christmas and Easter hymns, are clearly related to the “Christ of faith.”

But even the hymns that do relate more closely to a “Jesus of history” are still interested in present life-meaning, that is to say, they are interested in making use of Jesus as an exemplar. (I suspect that once hymns are being sung about or to an individual, one has moved beyond the historical to the personal and the religious.) So all of this belongs to the “Christ of faith.”

But the “Christ of faith” is not what I will be about this morning. What I will be trying to do is to summarize the latest research that attempts to discover the “Jesus of history,” whether or not one finds this meaningful for one’s personal religious philosophy.

The appropriateness and possibility of a study of the “historical Jesus”

Already here we’re in the soup, for, as I said in the introduction to my readings, many adherents will object that it’s an inappropriate and unholy thing to treat a divine figure as though he were merely human.

Or, again, it’s an awkward and even distasteful thing to coldly examine the warm life of one who has been an exemplar or hero for you. It feels like conducting an autopsy – and to an extent it is.

Beyond this, an historical objection from a number of scholars is that you really can’t discover a “Jesus of history,” since all the records we have of him were written by persons who were already making use of Jesus in one way or another. That is, for them, Jesus had already become a “Christ of faith” in some way.

Finding a “congenial Jesus”

It’s also interesting to note that most scholars who have undertaken to study the “Jesus of history” have found a figure compatible with their own beliefs and personal faith. Albert Schweitzer noted this in his classic study published in 1906 titled, The Quest of the Historical Jesus. This book was a survey of the various studies of the “historical Jesus” scholars had written during the late 18th and 19th centuries. The one thing Schweitzer found that could be said in common about the various portraits of the various scholars was that they found a Jesus compatible with their own beliefs, that is, a figure that could pretty much be brought directly into their own time and place.

Current scholars, aware of this tendency, try to guard it. For example, in 1985, thirty biblical scholars got together to form what was called “The Jesus Seminar,” a group that later expanded to over 200 “Fellows.” Their object was to bring to the public the latest research relating to the “Jesus of history.” They did this in 1993 in a book that made quite a splash, titled The Five Gospels. (It included the Gospel of Thomas as a fifth gospel.) Their primary rule for evidence was this: “Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.” (The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus, p. 5)

Yet, it appears that most of them have found a “congenial Jesus.” For example, as Flossie and I were driving up the California coast this past week from San Diego, we stopped in Los Angeles to visit with Professor Marvin Meyer. Dr. Meyer – “Marv” to me – attended the Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan at the same time I did in the early 1970’s. He went the academic route, not the ministerial route, and has been one of the scholars and translators on the Jesus Seminar panel, as well as a translator of the Gospel of Thomas, the translation I used earlier in today’s responsive reading.

Professor Meyer also recently had the distinction of being the English translator of the newly found manuscript, The Gospel of Judas Iscariot. This is a Gnostic gospel written in Coptic that presents Judas as a hero, the dearest of Jesus’ friends, the one who understood him best, and who, in handing him over to the authorities to be executed, was following the will of Jesus, for then Jesus’ soul would escape the entrapment of the body in good Gnostic fashion. (See Bart D. Ehrman, The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot, p. 65)

Anyway, in questioning Marv about recent research into the historical Jesus, at one point he laughingly commented that his fellow scholars sometimes joke among themselves at the realization that the historical Jesus that seems most historically plausible to them turns out to be a sage-like figure who would do pretty well as a university professor, a colleague uttering wise and witty aphorisms.

Despite all of this, the idea of the quest of the historical Jesus is the attempt to discover what, if anything, can be known of this person in history using the typical methods of historical investigation. Such an historical investigation, says John Dominic Crossan, one of the foremost current scholars in this area, is:

...not a disguise for doing theology and calling it history, doing autobiography and calling it biography, doing Christian apologetics and calling it academic scholarship.
(Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. xi)

Thus, in order to properly undertake such a study, one needs to try to bracket everything one has previously thought or believed about the figure of Jesus and to try to look at him as you would any other human being – that is, a person who lived in a particular time and at a particular place, who had a particular personality and particular ideas, ideals, aspirations, etc.

What have been the results of this study?

Two implausible historical possibilities

Let me begin by trying to put to rest a couple of the *least plausible* historical possibilities, the first being that there never was such a person in history. Occasionally, that is claimed; occasionally, I have heard it claimed. But from the perspective of historical science, to put it kindly, this is a rather difficult hypothesis to defend.

If Jesus never lived, then you have the unimaginably difficult *historical* problem of explaining how Christianity came into existence without him, and how later on Christianity wished to trace its origins back to this invented personality, and why it took the remarkable course of making the founder of Greek Christianity a member of the Jewish people.

A second thing sometimes claimed about Jesus is that he traveled to Egypt or to India or to various other places acquainting himself with magicians or Buddhists or Eastern wisdom or whatever. Again, from a historian's perspective, in trying to understand a given piece of history, one is seeking the simplest explanation, looking for evidence of things that are most probable, not for things without evidence that might still be possible. And in the case of trying to account for the development of early Christianity, one has all the materials one needs for a plausible explanation within the Judaism of Jesus' day.

Current agreements among scholars

So what are some of the current agreements and disagreements among the top current biblical historians? Let me start with some general agreements among the scholars:

- 1) First, in trying to get back to a Jesus of history, one should study the various gospels separately and not jumble them all up, as we typically do, thus getting a kind of "meta-Gospel" that is even further from a "Jesus of history." One historical conclusion that scholars agree on is the understanding, to quote scholar Bart Ehrman, "that we have different accounts from different authors writing at different times to different audiences for different reasons." (*The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, p. 33) It is, thus, by comparing and contrasting these different accounts that one tries to come to conclusions on the historical Jesus.
- 2) A second agreement among scholars – a long-time agreement – is that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the "synoptic" gospels ("with one eye") – as well as, perhaps, parts of the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, are closer to the "historical Jesus" than the Gospel of John, which most scholars agree was written quite a bit later than the others. I don't have time this morning to detail this, but the differences between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John are immense. In the Gospel of John, Jesus essentially speaks as the already risen Christ, addressing his hearers in long, involved discourses that are largely about his own mission and person – no parables, no exorcisms, little about the poor and oppressed, etc. The scholars of the Jesus Seminar, for example, found not even one saying in the Gospel of John that they could credit as being the words of the "historical Jesus."
- 3) A third agreement among scholars – and this, too, is a long-standing agreement – is that the Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the four canonical gospels and also that, even though the gospels appear before Paul's letters in the Christian scriptures, all of them are written after the letters of the Apostle Paul. Scholars typically date the letters of Paul between 50 and 60, the Gospel of Mark around

70 – 40 years after Jesus' estimate death in 30 – the Gospel of Matthew at 85, the Gospel of Luke at 90.

- 4) A fourth scholarly agreement is that there is very clear evidence that both Matthew and Luke used Mark in composing their gospels. Matthew reproduces 90% of Mark in his gospel and Luke 50%. Usually they reproduce the material in Mark in the same order, but when they depart from that order, it is Mark's order that both return to, indicating that Mark is a source for these other two gospels.
- 5) A fifth understanding among scholars is that there once existed an additional source document – which scholars have named “Q,” short for the German word, “*Quelle*,” meaning “source” – that both Matthew and Luke draw upon in addition to the Gospel of Mark in constructing their gospels. In Matthew, much of the “Q” source is found in one long, beautiful piece known as the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew chapters 5-7). In Luke, the content of the “Q” source is scattered throughout his gospel. The Gospel of Mark has none of this material.
- 6) A sixth agreement by historians in quest of the “historical Jesus” – one that should be obvious but is often overlooked – is that Jesus was part of the Jewish faith. It is quite typical, of course, after so many years of the Christian religion, to regard Jesus as the first Christian and to see him through the lens of later Christian thought-forms and creedal agreements. But it appears that Jesus did not intend to found a new religion, much less one that had him as a divine savior figure who was part of the Godhead. This would be absolute blasphemy to any person of the Jewish faith. Nor was Jesus executed for claiming he was God. As scholar E. P. Sanders says:

It is not historically impossible that Jesus was weird ... [but] the other things that we know about him make him a *reasonable* first-century [Jewish] visionary. (E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, p. 333)

So what did Jesus think? What was he about?

Two main hypotheses on Jesus' message and mission

Now I will present, in nutshell form, the two most basic hypotheses about the “historical Jesus.” And here there remains a division in the scholarly house.

The question for these scholars is whether or not Jesus was an “eschatological figure.” That is, did Jesus believe, teach, and live in the vivid expectation that the literal end of the age was upon his world, and did he think that he and his twelve disciples had a special role to play in that expected end of normal time?

Or, on the other hand, wasn't a literal end of the age essentially important to Jesus? Was he, instead, primarily concerned about a change of attitude, a change of consciousness in the *present* time?

The “eschatological Jesus”

Around the turn of the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer and a couple of others put forth the proposal that the “Jesus of history” was essentially an eschatological figure expecting an apocalyptic end to the present age and the beginning of a new age upon the earth. (“Apocalypse” is not just an ending; it is more importantly the beginning of something new.) This new age had in various ways been the hope of Jewish prophets in the past, and an apocalyptic entrance of this new age into the world was very much a part of the current thinking of Jesus’ time. Here’s the essence of their hypothesis:

- 1) Jesus, like John the Baptist, his mentor, who before his own execution baptized Jesus, believed and taught that the end of the present evil age was upon them and that the Kingdom of God was about to dawn, not through human will and effort, not by revolution or military might, but through the direct intervention of God and his angelic forces. In preparation for this coming Kingdom and to show oneself fit for it, one needed to repent and practice the ethic of love and justice, which was the essence of this coming kingdom. Those marked out for the blessedness of this coming reign of God are not necessarily who you might think, but rather (as in “the Beatitudes from Matthew 5): the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice.
- 2) Jesus believed that he and his disciples had a special role to play in relation to this coming Kingdom of God: first, to announce the Kingdom’s imminent appearance and to speak about its essential nature; and, secondly, when that Kingdom of God came to be God’s agents for it. This, indeed, is a messianic role, but please note, it is the role of, what is named a “designated Messiah,” that is, one who is not yet the Messiah but who would be shown to be so when the Kingdom arrived. The Kingdom and the Messiah are concepts that belong together. You don’t have a Messiah without a Kingdom of God in which the Messiah rules on God’s behalf – no Kingdom, no Messiah.
- 3) The primary evidence for Jesus’ sense of understanding himself as the “designated Messiah” is found in the title, “Son of Man,” a phrase with a developed history in Judaism that for Jesus appears to relate to one who comes at the end of the natural world’s existence to initiate the reign of God. Again, according to this hypothesis, if anything is historically certain about Jesus, it is that he used the phrase, “Son of Man.”

The remarkable textual evidence for this is that every time this term is found in the New Testament gospels – 82 times in all – it is *always exclusively* found on the lips of Jesus and *never* in any statement about Jesus. And what makes this so remarkable is that the title “Son of Man” is not the typical title that the gospel writers, or Paul, or others use to refer to Jesus. Rather, they speak of him as “Messiah” or “Son of God.” Thus, the phrase “Son of Man” would seem to go back to the “historical Jesus” himself.

But the question is: Did Jesus, since he usually speaks of the “Son of Man” in the third person, identify himself with the “Son of Man,” or was this something attributed to him later? Clearly, the gospel writers and the early church identified Jesus as the “Son of Man” and the “Messiah” – they were one and the same for them. But did the historical Jesus so identify himself?

Some of those who hold to theory of the “eschatological Jesus” think “yes;” others are not certain. Perhaps the “Son of Man” was a different figure in Jesus’ mind – not that he himself was the coming “Son of Man,” but rather that the “Son of Man” was a heavenly figure that would make Jesus and his disciples the agents of God in God’s new kingdom of love, just, and peace when that kingdom arrived.

At any rate, the role for Jesus (and his disciples) was an important one, even a “kingly” role; and, of course, Jesus is reported to have been crucified as the “King of the Jews.”

It is, thus, most likely this anticipation of being a ruling agent in God’s new kingdom that got Jesus executed – so say a number of scholars. And this, it is hypothesized, is the information that Judas Iscariot revealed to the Jewish authorities ... for only Jesus’ closest associates, his chosen twelve, not the public at large, knew of his understanding that he believed he was connected in some way to the coming “Son of Man.”

Why Judas would reveal this information is a matter of scholarly debate. I don’t have time to go into that now, and it has more to do with the “historical Judas” than the “historical Jesus;” but, at any rate, when confronted by the Jewish authorities with the question of being related to the Messiah of a new age, Jesus, according to the Gospel of Mark, admitted it:

“The high priest put a second question to him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ‘I am,’ said Jesus, ‘and you will see the Son of Man [note how Jesus changes the title from “Christ” or “Messiah,” which is how the gospel writers knew him, to his own title, “Son of Man”] seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.’” (Mark 14:61-62.)

Thus, there was no need for further witnesses, and like other visionary troublemakers before him such as John the Baptist, this led to Jesus’ death, but by crucifixion not by beheading (as with John).

This, in a nutshell, is the eschatological hypothesis. It comes in a number of variations and with different emphases.

The main strength of this hypothesis, apart from the fact that you can make use of many more of the gospel texts, is that you don’t need to taken the center figure out of the eschatological line – the line that includes John the Baptist, Jesus’ disciples, the apostle Paul, and the early Christian church.

Thus, we don't have to assume that those closest to Jesus didn't understand what was going on. They may have been peasants, like Jesus himself, but they were unintelligent. Rather, they knew what he was about. Indeed, they continued his mission after his death, the mission of bringing the Jewish light of God's love, justice, and peace to the Gentile world. As scholar E. P. Sanders pointedly says:

The view that Jesus was entirely deceptive and misled his disciples into false hopes, while spinning parables which can be unraveled only by twentieth-century literary analysis, must be rejected.

(Jesus and Judaism, p. 329)

Another strength of the argument for the "eschatological Jesus" is that the sayings that relate to the "Son of Man" are the ones containing the most clear indications of the expectation of a literal end of the present age and the beginning of a new one. And, as I indicated, the "Son of Man" phrase seems clearly to be connected to Jesus, for this is not how the gospel writers, Paul, or the early church knew him.

The problem of the gospel writers and the early church – now a generation after Jesus – was to explain why the Kingdom had not arrived yet, and why Jesus wasn't returning as expected. (Indeed, as time went on and Jesus still did not return, the expectation of a literal end of the age and an immediate arrival of the Kingdom faded into the background, though occasionally cropping up again in various movements, as we continue to see in our time).

Thus, if the gospel writers had known of "Son of Man" sayings indicating that Jesus believed the Kingdom was to be delayed – and, indeed, there are a couple of passages, which, in this hypothesis, would seem to have been added by later writers, such as, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Mark 13:32 & Matthew 24:36) – if they knew of "Son of Man" sayings indicating that Jesus thought the Kingdom was going to be delayed or that it wasn't to be taken literally, they would have used these. The fact that the gospel writers do allow Jesus to use the term "Son of Man" in all its apocalyptic color speaks for the faithful preservation of at least a kernel of historical fact with regard to Jesus, and perhaps much more than a kernel.

But though this understanding of Jesus as one who expected the Kingdom of God to come in his lifetime through a mighty act of God may have much to recommend it historically and textually, it has been hard for the Christian church to swallow because, clearly, Jesus was wrong with regard to the Kingdom of God coming in such a literal way.

But for Albert Schweitzer, for example, Jesus remains a heroic figure. He may have been wrong literally, but he was spiritually right with regard to his vision of and longing for such a kingdom of love, justice, and peace. (Indeed, for Schweitzer, the understanding of Jesus that the Kingdom of God was not of this current world, nor that it would arrive through everyday human effort and means, enabled Jesus to speak of a more essential and

ideal Kingdom.) In an often-quoted paragraph from Schweitzer's, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, he says:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.

Challenges to the "eschatological Jesus"

But "no!" say many recent scholars in quest of the historical Jesus, scholars who are questioning and revising this position that has held sway among the top scholars for most of the 20th century. Jesus was a more subtle figure than to believe in a literal, apocalyptic, and supernatural appearance of the Kingdom of God in the near future.

If you pay careful attention to his aphorisms, his parables, and his actions, you will see that Jesus belongs more in the wisdom tradition, is perhaps more like a sage or shaman, that for Jesus the future is here and now, if only you have eyes to see and ears to hear. Writes Marcus Borg, one of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar:

...he [Jesus'] was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion.

(Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 119)

Now it's clear, say these scholars, that John the Baptist before Jesus and the early church after him believed in a literal expectation of the end of the age and the supernatural appearance of the Kingdom on this earth with Jesus at its head. But Jesus was different, and he was misunderstood. Says Catholic researcher and long-time historian in these matters, John Dominic Crossan:

The major question is not whether Jesus *began* as an apocalyptic believer but whether he *continued* as such and whether, when he began his own mission, he did so by picking up the fallen banner of the Baptist.

(Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 46)

Crossan's opinion is that Jesus changed his theology. It was not enough to await the future kingdom, but that one must enter a present kingdom here and now, and that Jesus

was about living and demonstrating that. But the early church missed that and instead made Jesus into a Messiah of the end times.

To Crossan (and to many other scholars) little, really, can be known about the trial, crucifixion, and supposed bodily resurrection of Jesus. Crossan points out that, to date, only one crucified body has been archeologically uncovered. And the Romans crucified thousands, sometimes thousands in a single day. The soldiers would nail them in various positions out of boredom. Jesus' crucifixion is to be understood in this context – it was nothing special. (See Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, pp. 123ff.)

And so why was no body to be found? Because – and this is hard to take in – most were eaten by wild animals, either off the crosses or from the shallow graves dug by the Roman soldiers. The stories of Jesus' crucified body being placed in the lovely burial site of a wealthy person following his death, as well as most of the details of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial, are surely non-historical. These events, says Crossan, are “not history remembered but prophecy historicized.” (p. 145) “Watch, then,” says Crossan, “how the horror of that brutal truth [that there was probably nothing left of Jesus' body] is sublimated through hope and imagination into its opposite.” (p. 154) In other words, Jesus' death becomes a glorious thing.

And where does the resurrection idea come from? Crossan theorizes that it came from the Apostle Paul, who experienced meeting the “resurrected Jesus” on the road to Damascus. To Paul, Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of the general resurrection that was believed to occur in the end times. As Paul, writing to the church he started in the city of Corinth, says, “If there is no resurrection of the dead [that is, no general resurrection], then Christ is not risen.” (I Corinthians 15:13) So for Paul, the end times had already started; he and the others were simply awaiting the concluding steps, as people still are today.

All of this has little to do with the historical Jesus for Crossan and other Christian scholars. For them, the Easter experience has to do with the “unbroken and abiding presence” (p. 163) of Jesus, the “living Jesus,” as the Gospel of Thomas says, one who helps you to see the present world in a new way.

Conclusion

So this has been an introduction – and only an introduction, since there is so much material on this – to the continuing research in quest of the “historical Jesus.” Probably no debate on a person in history has generated as much interest and controversy. And in the end, there is no unanimity and a great deal that can never, at this far reach from the events, be known.

Still, much of what has come down to us from Jesus, whether directly or indirectly, inspires. In this regard, I give Albert Schweitzer the final word, the last paragraph of his own famous book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks that He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings that they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

(The Quest of the Historical Jesus, p. 403)

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing of Chalice

And now we extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on January 28, 2007. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, differs somewhat from this manuscript version.)