

Jesus In Recent Research

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I will be considering some recent reconstructions of the historical Jesus. My particular concern will be Jesus' understanding of himself and his aims as presented in these reconstructions, but I want to begin with some guidance on the historical Jesus from an unlikely source: Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas (*ST* 3a,2,10,ad2), God is present to and in Christ in three ways:

1. *Per essentiam, potentiam et praesentiam, sicut in ceteris creaturis*: the formula for how God is present as Creator. God's creative act undergirds what the creature does. In Christ there is full creaturely reality and hence all the features of creaturely agency are operative in him (except sin, because sin is not constitutive of our condition). Among them, we might say, are contingency of intellectual horizon, historical limitation, a restricted worldview, the general features proper to person in a particular place and time, etc. (We can only be *here* and *now*.) In other words, Jesus can have the mindset proper to a first century Palestinian Jew and in the workings of his mind can think the kind of thoughts one would expect of a human being in his situation, and indeed, he must have this restriction if creatureliness is his condition. He must have an historical specificity there and then, with all that that implies (including, by the way, death).

2. *Per gratiam gratum facientem, sicut in sanctis*. God is active in Christ by grace, as God is active in the minds and hearts of other holy men and women, bestowing gifts of unitive knowledge, spiritual insight, prophecy, love etc through the Holy Spirit. The conscious centre of Christ's personality is filled with an abundance of spiritual gifts. In particular, there is a privileged perception of divine things in which his mind is led to an enlightened, infused sense of God. As Erik Persson interprets Aquinas here: 'If it is possible to speak of 'a revelation of God in Christ' in Thomas -- an expression which he himself never uses -- this must refer to a knowledge brought about by God in the human soul of Christ, on the ground of which he can be said to be *primus et principalis Doctor*' (*ST*, 3a,7,7).¹ If Jesus is the supreme *knower* of God, then the human focus of revelation is his grasp of God by which he situates himself at the centre of God's purposes for Israel and the world. The depth of this knowledge doesn't conflict with what we might call the furniture of his mind, the restricted conceptual categories available to him in mode 1. (The spiritual knowledge found in Christ won't be less than what is found in the Little Flower. If in the restricted context of *petit bourgeois*, 19th Century Normandy, the Little Flower's grasp of the things of God was profound, *a fortiori* Jesus, in the context of 1st Century Palestine, had an even greater communion with God and a conscious grasp of his place in God's dealings with the world. If the Little Flower knew who she was under God, Jesus did too.)

3. *Per unionem personalem*: God unites his self-expressive Word to Jesus of Nazareth and this union does not conflict with what is brought about by the other two modes of divine presence because divine causality doesn't stand in a contrastive relationship with the causality of created things. There is the full operation of human subjecthood (mind, will, corporeal personhood) in union with the divine Word.² There is no conflict between radical historical contingency and divine status simply because there is no conflict between creaturely, secondary causality -- thinking and acting as a first century Jew -- and divine, primary causality -- the actuality of God's personal Word in relation to this human person. It is this, and only this, which makes the Chalcedonian conception of the Incarnation possible:

that there can be an individual who is both inseparable from the actuality of God and inseparable from involvement in the human continuum.

So the fact that Life of Jesus Research (LJR) shows us, in ever greater detail, the contingency of context, horizon, restriction, mindset proper to the first mode in no way interferes with the creaturely reality of Jesus being supremely gifted with divine grace and radiating the personhood of the divine Son and Word. If Jesus really was the sort of first century Galilean Jew whom LJR now portrays -- a man embedded in a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances who thought and acted in ways directly relevant to his culture and context -- then in principle, it seems to me, the findings of LJR pose no threat to faith in Incarnation because there is no tension between mode 1 (particularity) and mode 3 (divine status). Quite the opposite, if we think of the implications of what Incarnation means.

But there's an important question related to mode 2: how LJR approaches the question of the *religious mind* of Jesus, his grasp of his identity and significance, what he knew of God and how he situates himself in the context of God's dealings with Israel and the world. Increasingly, I find myself dissatisfied with accounts which exhibit an Apollinarian rejection of the human mind of Jesus through a scepticism about the extent and depth of the insight available to him and about his position as the generative source of the ideas about himself.

This can take two forms: first of all, a judgement that the articulated scheme of self-understanding presented in rich ways in the Gospels is post-resurrection in origin and cannot reliably be located in Jesus himself. We can, in principle, have no access to the actuality of the Jesus 'behind the Gospels' whose aims and intentions are unknown to us: all we have is how others later interpreted him and behind that is *terra incognita* into which we neither can nor need to travel. (You'll recognise Bultmann and the presuppositions of Lutheran *sola fide* theology here.) Or, more commonly these days, it can judge that what Jesus intended in his ministry is discontinuous, even radically so, with later Christology and soteriology. This account of Christian origins marginalises the mind of Jesus from the development of Christian thought and so what he intended and understood makes no contribution to what is to be believed.

Christian faith, of course, refers to and interprets Jesus, but in what sense does it depend upon, build upon and accurately convey the actuality of Jesus in ways that are not morally flawed by a disproportion between what it says about Jesus and how Jesus saw himself? There are considerable implications for Christian faith if the charge is proved that the canonical Jesus is radically discontinuous with the pre-canonical Jesus and that post-resurrection faith embellishes the significance of Jesus in ways which exceed and even disregard what he thought of himself. It is not uncommon to find that the actuality of Jesus, recovered by historical reconstruction, is meant to stand in sharp contrast with the faith-dreams projected by the post-resurrection Church.³

My own view is that without a real, identifiable and substantive continuity between Jesus' self-estimate and post-resurrection Christology, it becomes difficult for Christian faith to avoid the charge that it is, as Martin Hengel puts it, a 'grandiose self-deception'.⁴ There is a high price to pay if Jesus is marginalised from the substance of Christian faith by being treated as the *object* of ever more elaborate interpretation, rather than as the *active subject* whose self-interpretation, reliably conveyed, is both the source and controlling norm for later interpreters. You will see in these comments a rejection of the high road to the claim that Christian origins is a falsifying process in which the Church divinises a Jewish teacher, a high road that N.T. Wright has helpfully recast as a double highway:

- The *Schweitzerstrasse* where the travellers hold that Jesus, the deluded apocalyptic visionary, expected the end of the world, and when it didn't occur, took upon himself the Great Affliction that was to break upon Israel and the world. Subsequent Christian faith is a way of coping with the disappointment of the failed vision of its apocalyptic founder. Even if we did get to Jesus along this road, we would be alienated by his strangeness.
- The *Wredebahn* where the travellers claim that all we know of Jesus is that he was a non-apocalyptic Galilean teacher or prophet who did and said some striking things and was eventually executed. We in fact know little about Jesus; the gospels, in outline and details, give us primarily the concerns of the early church. Mark's gospel is therefore a theologically motivated fiction, devised within an early church that had already substantially altered direction away from Jesus' own agenda. Wright's survey of recent approaches is appropriately entitled, 'Heavy traffic on the *Wredebahn*'.

It will come as no surprise to you that recent extensions of the *Wredebahn* in North America have become a 12-lane freeway. But unlike earlier journeys on the *Wredebahn*, the North American Quest is characterised not by sceptical agnosticism but by a new set of affirmative paradigms about the pre-canonical Jesus (a better designation than the confusing term 'historical Jesus').⁵ They may be less sceptical than their predecessors about what they think they can say about Jesus, but I am not persuaded the new interdisciplinary approach to the

pre-canonical Jesus is flexible enough to do justice to the question of Jesus' religious mind. If anything, as I'll indicate with Crossan, the reconstruction, although it seems flexible, open-ended and provisional, may be strangely rigid in what it enables us to hold about Jesus.

Here I must oversimplify, and go quickly over some of the features of the new approaches. I rely on the excellent survey by W.R.Telford and the comments by Marcus Borg, one of the North American questers.⁶

- A tendency to ask broader questions than 'Did Jesus say this or not, in a particular pericope?' The focus is more on how Jesus relates to both first century Judaism and early Christianity than to how he relates to the Christ of faith, and consequently, the criterion of multiple attestation (involving non-canonical Gospels too) is given priority over the criterion of dissimilarity.
- An interdisciplinary approach, in which a sociological perspective is brought into the forefront of the Quest as a way of uncovering the dynamics of the social world in which Jesus lived.⁷ Jesus is set not only in a textual context (Rabbinic and Targumic traditions, Qumran writings) but in an analysed social context: if Jesus intended a particular reordering of Jewish values and religious identity distinct from other programmes -- 'how to be Israel in this situation', for example -- then the social dynamics of first century Jewish Palestine within which this programme made primary and initial sense need to be explored. This is now examined from a variety of disciplines: cultural anthropology, social history, social sciences, the study of peasant societies, purity systems, honour and shame as social values, etc.
- Linked to this are attempts to describe Jesus as a 'social type', a figure in a particular context who can be helpfully described by designating his social role.

I point you to Telford's summary of how Jesus emerges as a social type if he is considered in the light of 'foreground data' (the narrative tradition, especially the miracles, sayings and the traditions surrounding his death) and 'background data' (the elements of general context posited as appropriate to understanding him in his first century setting). Here, weighting is all and what should strike us about this helpful taxonomy is the selective and constructed character of the images of Jesus offered by historians, depending on their choice of emphasis, what counts as primary data, which heuristic models are used, etc. Telford speaks of a consensus today 'that a combination of *teacher*, *prophet*, *healer* best captures historically his social identity or role' (Telford, p.55).

Foreground data

- If weight is given to the miracle tradition, then Jesus emerges as an ancient *magician* (Morton Smith) or as a Jewish charismatic *healer* and *exorcist* (Vermes).
- If the weight is given to the sayings tradition, then a range of images of Jesus is adduced.
- If the wisdom sayings (proverbs, parables, aphorisms etc.) are given prominence, then Jesus emerges as a *sage* (Vermes, Flusser) or even an *itinerant subversive sage* (Borg, Robinson, Funk).
- If an emphasis on the authenticity of the prophetic and apocalyptic sayings is retained, then Jesus emerges as an *eschatological prophet* (Meyer, Sanders, Charlesworth).
- If his Kingdom saying are interpreted apocalyptically (following Schweitzer), and linked with the Son of Man sayings, then Jesus is an other-worldly figure, expecting cosmic catastrophe and relatively indifferent to social concerns.

- If the Kingdom sayings are not interpreted apocalyptically, and the Son of Man sayings are viewed as secondary, then Jesus emerges as a this-worldly figure, a *social prophet*, with a social programme (Borg, Horsley, Hollenbach).
- If the emphasis is placed on the opposition to him and his death at the hands of the Romans, then Jesus emerges as a para-Zealot *revolutionary* (Brandon) or the pacifist victim of oppression.

Background data

The choice of context in which to place Jesus affects the estimate given of him:

- When emphasis is placed on the Palestinian Jewish context and within that on the Rabbinic tradition (although that did not flourish till after 70AD), then Jesus can be seen as the inspired *Rabbi* (Flusser, Chilton) or the *Pharisee* (Falk).
- If the choice is made to place him in the context of apocalyptic Judaism, then he can be seen as the '*humane apocalypticist*' (Charlesworth) or the '*reasonable visionary*' (Sanders).
- If his Galilean provenance is emphasised, then he becomes a charismatic holy man or *hasid* in the same tradition as Honi the Circle-Drawer or Hanina ben Dosa (Vermes).
- If Hellenistic influences in Galilee are emphasised, then he can be seen as a *Cynic teacher* (Mack, Crossan)
- If it is judged that he conforms to no particular social type, he cannot be placed in one of these categories (Hengel)

The Jesus who is envisaged in these accounts is the pre-canonical Jesus, arrived at through certain judgements about the nature of the Gospel traditions (both canonical and extra-canonical -- the Gospel of Thomas is now a controversial card in the game), and set in the dynamics of the religious, social and economic life of Palestine. There is then a radical dependence between the reconstructed Jesus and the reconstructed context/model: how the context and social model are understood determines how Jesus is understood. 'Determines' is not too strong a word, for one of the problems with this approach is that the grid of social and economic context is such a strong factor it can inhibit responsible handling of the actual textual evidence we have for Jesus. No wonder Sean Freyne comments that 'the quest for the historical Jesus is in danger of becoming the quest for the historical Galilee'.⁸

In these investigations, we must remember that both 'Jesus' and 'Palestine' are *constructs* arrived at by certain ways of handling the available data and influenced by judgements about the weight to be given to different features of transmitted texts and features of the context. The past then is not a place of certainties, but a terrain that is plural and that needs to be approached in plural ways (textual, historical and cultural), requiring a complex grid if it is to be charted. Hence Crossan's insistence that there is no one single 'historical Jesus' -- there will always be 'divergent historical Jesuses' and there will always be divergent Christs built upon them:

'...at the heart of any Christianity there is always, covertly or overtly, a dialectic between a historically read Jesus and a theologically read Christ. Christianity is always, in other words, a Jesus/Christ/ianity...The structure of a Christianity will always be: *this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now*. I am proposing that the dialectic between Jesus-s and Christ-s... is at the heart of both tradition and canon, that it is perfectly valid, has always been with us and probably always will be, at least in Catholic Christianity'.⁹

I leave it to Karl Barth in heaven to smack his lip at that juicy morsel of liberal theology. Let me give you a taste of how the nexus of Jesus and context is handled in John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Crossan's reconstruction differs from the Enlightenment's dream of value-free objectivity, or liberal theology's dream of the pure unchanging essence of Christianity.¹⁰ As one pole of the dialectic between an historically-read Jesus and a theologically-read Christ, he attempts to reconstruct the programme of the historical Jesus, seen as 'a peasant Jewish Cynic'. Crossan's Jesus is a Mediterranean peasant living under Roman rule who participated in the widespread social unrest of his day: his proclamation of the Kingdom is the social alternative to the power-brokered relations which characterised Palestinian life, and is influenced by Cynic philosophy's metaphors of the 'kingdom' as the sphere of freedom in which a wise person may live, rather than God's definitive gathering of Israel.

This is a Cynic/sapiential, rather than an eschatological/apocalyptic Jesus -- in Crossan's opinion, Jesus rejects the Baptist's eschatological message -- whose proclamation of a 'brokerless kingdom' is his deliberate counter to the context of 'embattled brokerage' of Roman Palestine. In the stratified society of Palestine, power is brokered through networks based on personal favouritism, in transactions of 'friendship' or indebtedness. Patronage, a form of social stratification, transmits a set of social values, a hierarchical system of honour and shame, insiders -- few-- and outsiders -- the majority. Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God in the context of oppression experienced by peasants in a patronal society and opens the way to an unbrokered world without patronage of any kind.

Jesus presents a social programme that challenges and subverts all existing social relationships, a programme that has two centres: *open commensality* (table fellowship) which creates an alternative lifestyle of unbrokered equality and his *miracles* which subvert 'the religiopolitical ascendancy of priests and temple' which claimed the power to cure sickness caused by sin. The brokerage of divine healing is undermined by his freely given miracles which Crossan places in the category of magic, following David Aune's non-pejorative, sociological definition of magic as 'that form of religious deviance whereby individual or social goals are sought by means alternate to those normally sanctioned by the dominant religious institutions'.¹¹ 'That intersection of magic and meal or miracle and table,' says Crossan, 'is pointed directly and deliberately at the intersection of patronage and clientage, honor and shame, the very heart of ancient Mediterranean society.' If that is incorrect, he continues, his book will have to be redone.¹²

Jesus' strategy, says Crossan, was 'the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power'. He himself refused to be a broker or mediator, but simply the one who announced 'that neither [brokerage nor mediation] should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself...He announced, in other words, the brokerless kingdom of God'.¹³ This programme of 'magic and meals' is not a peasant takeover of organised power, but a subversive alternative which can never find formal realisation, a countercultural, egalitarian disruption of patronage.

Jesus' challenge in Jerusalem is, for Crossan, an explosion of 'indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was nonegalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and political level. His symbolic destruction [of the Temple] simply actualized what he had already said in his teachings, effected in his healings, and realized in his mission of open commensality'.¹⁴ Crossan's Jesus seems to die because of a bad bout of ill-considered anger. (Crossan, by the way, holds that Jesus' first followers knew almost nothing

whatsoever about the details of the crucifixion, death and burial. What we have now in those detailed passion accounts is not *history remembered* but *prophecy historicised*.¹⁵) Crossan's Jesus seems to inhabit the interstices in an over-developed and highly speculative, sociological grid, and to have no reality other than that defined by what Crossan's model of agrarian society and its social types permits.¹⁶

The grounds on which this can be criticised are as legion as the devils that were cast out: to me, it is tendentious, flawed and strangely rigid in what it enables us to hold about Jesus. Most of all, it is evasive of the elements of definitiveness which are attached to the canonical Jesus' mission. Jesus views himself not as Messiah, the mortal and soon to be enthroned Son of Man, Son of the House, but, perhaps in equal measure, egalitarian, magician, cynic, peasant, table host. It is a reflection of a postmodern face at the bottom of an ecologically sustainable well. Ben Meyer says of Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* 'as historical-Jesus research, it is unsalvageable'. He criticises Crossan's treatment of open commensality for 1/ dropping its most conspicuous and scandalous feature, the reconciliation of "sinners", their integration into the restored Israel coming into being in response to Jesus and 2/ in putting its place an egalitarianism that had not hitherto figured in the hope of Israel or on the contemporary Palestinian scene.¹⁷

I want to contrast this with a line of Jesus research which builds upon the work of Ben Meyer.¹⁸ Where Crossan's Jesus exhibits no grasp of himself as either the definitive agent of God to Israel or as the one whose death is the necessary, efficacious mystery at the heart of God's work, Meyer builds a pattern of resonance and reinforcement between Jesus' programme of restoring, reconstituting, definitively gathering Israel into its definitive religious form -- the ministry in Galilee -- and the riddle of Temple-building to be achieved through his atoning death in Jerusalem for the sins of those who refuse to be thus gathered.

Meyer is, I think, the great figure in Life of Jesus Research: Meyer's case is that Jesus, as the master-builder of the eschatological Temple, saw himself as creating the community of restored and faithful Israel which God raises in these end days as the focus of his saving action in the world. Jesus, the initiator of this foundational vision and the first interpreter of himself, saw himself at the centre of God's dealing with Israel as its climactic revealer, interpreter of its law, restorer of its community of faith, builder, shepherd and healer: as the bearer of the definitive mission to Israel, and as the builder of the community which will bear the fruit of that mission and become the light to the nations.

His book *The Aims of Jesus* lays the foundation for Jesus studies on which E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright have depended, Wright more successfully than Sanders in my opinion. It is Meyer who places Jesus in the theological context of *the definitive restoration of Israel*,¹⁹ and N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* seems to me to be a remarkable development of Meyer's work in that, while following Meyer in setting Jesus in the theological context of reconstituting Israel around himself, he sets this theological theme in a richer context, centring on what it means to be Israel both religiously and politically.

In Wright's view, Jesus diagnoses the religio-political condition of Israel as projected by a religious nationalism: it is heading for violence, he judges. If Israel continues on this path, it will lead to disaster in the form of destruction by Rome which, like Babylon according to Jeremiah, will be the agent of God's wrath. The reason for God's judgement is Israel's failure to obey God's call to be his people, and, more narrowly, Israel's growing commitment to national rebellion, coupled with her failure to enact justice within her own society, not least within the Temple system itself. The clash between Jesus and his contemporaries,

especially the Pharisees, whom Wright refuses to whitewash as pious students of the Law, 'must be seen in terms of alternative political agendas generated by alternative eschatological beliefs and expectations' (390).

According to Wright, Jesus attacks what had become the standard symbols of the Second Temple worldview. A particular version of Torah-zeal was a way of defining Israel against the onslaughts of paganism. 'For the Shammaite Pharisees, the coming kingdom of YHWH would be a matter of national liberation and the defeat of the pagans. For Jesus, the kingdom was on offer to those who would repent of just that aspiration....The temple cult and the observance of sabbaths, of food taboos and of circumcision were the key thing which marked out Jew from Gentile, which (in other words) maintained and reinforced exactly the agenda, both political and religious, of the hard-line Pharisees.' (384).

These were the clearest marker posts for the symbolic world of Israel which Jesus was reordering on a different basis: he 'was announcing the kingdom in a way which did not reinforce, but rather called into question, the agenda of revolutionary zeal which dominated the horizon of, especially, the dominant group within Pharisaism' (390). A particular form of Torah-zeal was a way of defining Israel against paganism. 'Israel was warned that her present ways of going about advancing the kingdom were thoroughly counter-productive, and would result in a national disaster. Jesus was therefore summoning his hearers to *be* Israel in a new way'.²⁰ So this is a Jesus who is inseparably a religious and political figure, redefining Israel's hope in relation to land, family, Torah and Temple:

- restored land: his healing miracles fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah about the return of God to Zion in Is 35.
- Family was redefined in the new family tie created by allegiance to Jesus and by the promise that the eschatological blessings would reach beyond the confines of kinship: many would come from east and west into open table-fellowship.
- Torah was redefined: forgiveness, not purity-observance was placed at the heart of the symbolic praxis which was to characterise redefined Israel.
- A rebuilt Temple: all that Jesus was introducing would fulfil all that the Temple offered, making it redundant. 'Jesus was forming a counter-Temple movement around himself' (437).

Jesus also redefines the tradition of holy war, believing 'that he had to fight the true battle of the people of YHWH, through opposing, not just the pagans,..not just some renegade Jews, but the whole movement in Jewish life which had embraced exactly this tradition of holy war' (449). He redefined the enemy: not Rome but Satan who had 'duped YHWH's people into taking the pagan route, seeking to bring YHWH's kingdom by force of arms and military revolt' (564).

According to Wright, Jesus makes his programme of being Israel-for-the-sake-of-the-world determinative for his own vocation: what he prescribes for Israel is thematised in his own life. The alternative values he holds out in his proclamation of the Kingdom are lived out by him in practice, culminating in his taking upon himself the fate of the nation in its most dramatic expression: crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. Israel was suffering at the hands of the pagans; the Roman cross was the bitterest symbol of that continuing exilic state and Jesus would take that upon himself. This movement towards death on the cross is his deepest subversion of the nationalist agenda, because he would let evil do its worst to him and not return evil for pagan evil, in the dark hope of vindication after suffering, to which the

martyr tradition pointed. Jesus' riddles suggest that he intended to evoke and enact this tradition:

He would turn the other cheek; he would go the second mile; he would take up the cross. He would be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. He would be Israel for the sake of the world. He would be the means of the kingdom's coming, both in that he would embody in himself the renewed Israel and in that he would defeat evil once and for all. But the way in which he would defeat evil would be the way consistent with the deeply subversive nature of his own kingdom-announcement. He would defeat evil by letting it do its worst to him. (564-5)

In other words, in the features of his life, Jesus embodies Israel by binding the fate of the nation to his own fate. At the same time, he evokes and embodies the definitive return of God to Zion because Israel was at the great climactic turning point when God was acting decisively. Jesus enacts those traditions in his journey to Jerusalem (the coming of the King), his messianic act in the Temple (the Lord coming to his temple to purify and perfect it) and his death at the hands of pagans in the hope of vindication. His symbolic acts at the Last Supper indicate that Jesus thought of his approaching death as the new exodus, the renewal of the covenant, the forgiveness of sin, the end of exile. His death 'would do for Israel what Israel could not do for herself. It would thereby fulfil Israel's vocation that she should be the servant people, the light of the world.' (596-7). So, in addition to embodying Israel, Jesus embodies in himself 'the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God' bringing Israel's exile to an end (653).

So Wright's proposal is that Jesus acts with a sense of himself as both the paradigm of faithful Israel and the agent of God's decisive saving action: he has a clear sense that the Israel which he gathers around himself will be taken, through his self-giving in death, into its final destiny, the Kingdom of forgiven sinners to which the nations will come. His programme, as outlined by Wright, is no less political, contextual, social, religious than Crossan's reconstruction, but it gives a central place to themes of ultimate significance which are marginalised by Crossan. This is a Jesus whose immersion in the social, political and religious reality of Israel is total and active -- what Aquinas might recognise as proper to the creaturely restrictiveness of mode 1 -- yet he acts with a sense of being central to God's definitive action for the good of the world -- the implications of which the Christology of mode 3 will later try to probe. And this is a Jesus who has a deep spiritual grasp by which he situates himself and his death at the centre of God's purposes for Israel and the world -- a spiritual knowledge proper to mode 2.

You can see the direction in which we have moved: away from readings in which the restricted horizon of the exegete determines a reductionist portrayal of Jesus towards an account in which Jesus' grasp of God and God's purposes form a central feature of LJR. Wright, like Meyer, counters the tendency of some LJR to be minimalist about Jesus' religious knowledge and experience. I can only applaud. LJR often seems fated to deal badly with this area because of its sceptical assumptions, an over-reliance on the criterion of dissimilarity between Jesus and the Church and its sometimes strong desire to distance the 'real Jesus' from Christological doctrine. It also often makes the assumption that early Christology is 'low' and later Christology is 'high', and therefore the Christological categories closest to Jesus and perhaps deriving directly from him, are the 'low' end of the Christological spectrum. Yet the earliest Christian writings, those of Paul, give no evidence that the Christology of the 40s and 50s was 'low': quite the reverse, in fact. I sometimes wonder if 'early low Christology' is not a fantasy of modern exegesis.

Let me make two points: firstly, perhaps we need to recognise that the features of the historical Jesus may not be adequately established by deconstructing the text of the Gospels with a heavy reliance on the criterion of dissimilarity and a preoccupation with source criticism of those Gospel traditions. Should the Gospels be the primary and exclusive source for an inquiry into Jesus' grasp of himself and God's purposes? Bultmann pointed out that the Synoptic Gospels could not be regarded as the primary evidence of early Christian religion and theology, and that other NT writings, especially the letters of Paul, take us closer to the heart of early Christian thought about Christ and salvation. But they may also take us close to that stream of self-interpretation which flowed from Jesus himself, and that has not been properly developed by the Questers. Perhaps some of the other themes of early Christian interpretation bear the marks of insights bequeathed by Jesus himself as the categories in which he expressed especially the significance of his death. Perhaps there is a shorter line between Jesus and some other NT themes which may make a contribution to how LJR may be conducted. LJR perhaps needs to open up the boundaries of its research into the continuity between Jesus and some non-Gospel theologoumena.

Secondly, I've indicated that I think LJR needs a better account of what Aquinas designates as mode 2 of God's presence in Jesus and address the character of Jesus' religious knowledge. (Here I am not prescribing what LJR ought to come up with, but I am saying that if the programme of LJR is so narrowly conceived that it cannot deal properly with this area, for its own good it might need to recognise this weakness and approach the question of Jesus' prophetic and mystical knowledge with more imagination in order to correct its own post-Enlightenment bias about religion and religious experience.)

And religious experience is the point. If Aquinas is right about modes 1 and 2, then it is right to think that Jesus had forms of religious experience in common with other holy men and women, and in continuity with the forms of experience available to his contemporaries, from which derive his grasp of himself in God's purposes. He was not a Liberal Protestant ethicist wandering around Galilee saying 'God, I wonder who on earth I am and what I'm supposed to be doing, but here are some good bits of advice to be getting on with...'

A very original contribution to these questions of Jesus' religious experience, its connection with experiential patterns in 1st century Jewish religion and the possible value of non-Gospel NT writings for Jesus research has come recently from Margaret Barker: her proposals about these three areas go against the grain of much New Testament scholarship and is therefore worth attention.²¹ I can only give an inadequate summary of her complex case. She places Jesus in contact with two religious traditions which she conjectures have contributed to the form of his self-understanding: first of all, she suggests he may have been in touch with the traditions of mystical, ascending visionary experience of God -- mysticism of the throne of God, 'merkabah mysticism' -- in which Jewish visionaries ascended into the presence of God, were transformed into heavenly beings and given insight into heavenly mysteries. (1 Enoch is perhaps the best known example of this mysticism.)

She follows Massingberd Ford in holding that the visions in the book of Revelation incorporate a record of Jewish visionary experience before Jesus, that there is reason to think they were connected with the group around John the Baptist, and that through him Jesus came into contact with these traditions about the heavenly Lamb/Servant/Lord who in the presence of God sheds his blood as an offering for sin and is then exalted in heaven.

The second related tradition is that of the mystical theologoumena surrounding the Temple cult: what takes place in the Temple is a copy of the worship in heaven. The liturgical counterpart of mystical visionary ascent into the heavens takes place in the Temple, supremely on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest, transformed into an angelic being so that he may enter the divine presence, goes behind the veil to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat (*kapporeth/hilasterion*), for the atonement of sins. She argues that the evidence suggests that at the heart of the Second Temple cult had been a ritual in which the high priest represented the LORD, Yahweh, who offered his own blood, his life, as an atoning sacrifice to the Most High God.

There was, she argues, an imperfect identification of Israel's God, Yahweh, with the Most High God, El Elyon, and that this imperfect monotheism led to Yahweh being regarded as the Great Angel who led the worship of the Most High God in heaven. The Temple cult ritually enacted this heavenly worship and thought of the high priest's sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement as an enactment on earth of the heavenly event in which Yahweh, the Great Angel, offered himself to El Elyon for the sins of Israel.

'Yahweh was the chief of the seventy sons of El Elyon, and the guardian deity of Israel. The Yahweh of the Old Testament, the LORD, was Israel's second God.' (Barker, p.2) This tradition, she argues, persisted in the apocalyptic and mystical traditions of Judaism which formed the religious matrix within which the patterns of early Christology crystallised so rapidly: patterns were already in place, as it were, in Jewish religion, involving God and the Great Angel, the Angel of the Presence, the visible heavenly manifestation of the invisible God, the human figure seen on the divine throne. She makes the connection between the vision in Revelation and the high priestly act of atonement in the Temple: 'The slain Lamb of Revelation, filled with the sevenfold spirit of God, is the royal high priest, the Servant who has poured out his life as a sin offering and then approached the throne....'

Barker suggests that at his baptism -- the point in his life when we may be right to envisage a mystical ascent into the presence of God -- Jesus had a vision of the throne in which he was given to understand that the slain lamb that he saw, slain as an offering for sins yet standing in God's presence, was himself. 'This vision showed what Jesus had to accomplish: the sacrifice of the Servant, the Lamb, which would inaugurate the Atonement and save his people from the imminent wrath.'²² If these connections are possible, then Jesus understood himself as the Lamb, the Servant, the LORD, come to deliver his people by making a sacrifice for the definitive atonement of Israel, and subsequently to be enthroned in the divine presence. Drawing on these two traditions she thinks that Jesus saw himself as the great high priest who was to shed his blood for the great Atonement, and that it is this high priestly paradigm that is the generative core of the earliest Christology and the Soteriology.

This, she says, offers a new paradigm which replaces the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. From his baptism onwards, he is the Lord who has risen into the presence of God, and so he conducts his ministry with a sense that he comes 'from above' -- in which case the Johannine pattern of descent from above becomes plausible -- with a clear sense of himself as the LORD who rescues his people by an atoning sacrifice in his blood, after which he would be exalted and enthroned in heaven as the companion of God's throne. (Ps 110 is, after all, the most frequently used OT text in the New Testament.) In which case, the early Jerusalem tradition which Paul quotes in Romans 3.25 may have close connections with Jesus' esoteric teaching to the inner group about his death: 'Christ, whom God puts forward as an expiation (*hilasterion*) by his blood'. Here the earthly event of the shedding of Christ's blood on Golgotha is seen as the sprinkling of blood on the heavenly

mercy seat on the Day of Atonement. It will be developed later, of course, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but the germinating insight may spring from how Jesus himself reworked patterns of Jewish mystical religion in the light of what he experienced through its imagery.

If so, then, she says, ‘what Jesus believed about himself was identical with what the young church preached about him, even though he had been imperfectly understood at times. It makes Jesus himself the author and finisher of the faith, rather than the early communities, a supposition which has been fashionable for some time. The great message of atonement was not just a damage limitation exercise on the part of a traumatized group of disciples who could find no other way of coming to terms with the death of their leader. The sources do enable us to see how Jesus understood his own death, if only we listen to what they are saying and do not sit in judgement upon them with preconceived notions of what could and could not have been the case. The predictions of the Passion were made by Jesus himself, even though the details may have been added later.’²³

Now if, as seems indisputable to me, Jesus gave a central role to Temple imagery in characterising his mission -- building the Temple of restored Israel as a definitive dwelling place for God and as the focus of the pilgrimage of the nations (Ben Meyer’s case) -- it takes only a small step to see his death as the foundational and necessary work to be performed in that Temple, as the climactic atonement for sins, so that God may dwell in a forgiven and purified people. If others made that connection in the first decade after his death, could not Jesus himself, in approaching his death, have made precisely that connection? And might not Jewish mysticism of the throne of God and Temple worship be the source of the imagery which shaped his conception of himself and his death? Can we not allow that categories like these which certainly flowed into early Christian thought may also have formed Jesus’ own thought? Could there not be a stronger continuity than LJR has felt able to recognise between Jesus and the earliest Christian theologoumena about his death, its purpose and his destiny?

Meyer and Wright have made a strong case for a body of esoteric teachings given by Jesus about his death to an inner group of disciples. Barker has amplified this and provided a possible account of the source and content of that teaching by uncovering the significance of mystical traditions within Judaism which were afterwards excised by the Rabbinic reordering of Judaism after the traumas of CE 70 and 135. What flows into the Christian development of 2nd Temple imagery has as much right to claim continuity with Biblical Judaism as does Rabbinic Judaism. If Barker is right, then the principal Jewish context in which we must place Jesus is not that of Galilean healers and teachers, but that of mystical Judaism and Temple traditions. Her case, of course, depends upon certain hypotheses and certain connections being made, but in my view it has considerable merit in proposing a context within which Jesus may have come to a grasp of his ultimate significance.

If these hypotheses are right, then LJR may need to balance its reliance on sociological models and the dynamics of peasant societies with a better and more imaginative reconstruction of the forms of Jewish religion that shaped Jesus’ mind and religious experience. And it may need to extend its interest away from intense source criticism of the Gospel traditions and open up the boundaries of its research to include the significance of non-Gospel theologoumena for our account of Jesus’ self-interpretation. Why should those texts receive such little attention, while non-canonical Gospels like the Gospel of Thomas are accorded high evidential status in the North American Quest? Is it because they show a greater consistency of interpretation between Jesus and the early community than the

presuppositions of LJR often allow? The next generation of Questers will be busy for a long time to come.

¹ P.E.Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas* (Blackwell, 1970), p.25. This is a healthy antidote to modern (German) interpretation of revelation as 'events' or 'history'. '[Christ] is thus the first and principal Teacher of the faith... since the highest earthly expression of the revealed knowledge of God is to be found in him' (206). For a pneumatological elaboration of this theme, cf. J.McDade, 'Jesus and the Spirit', *The Month* (December, 1994), pp.498-503.

² The problem with asking if the subject in Christ is human or divine is that 'or' implies a contrastive relation between the created and the divine in Christ; because the question is misleading, the answers are too.

³ 'Why do quest for the historical Jesus studies..? May I be so bold as to answer briefly in the terms of a prominent Liberationist? I answer: In order to overthrow (not just to avoid or correct) the 'mistake called Christianity' (Miranda). What is that mistake? It is summed up in the divinization of Jesus as Son of David, Christ, Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity, etc. This divinization was the specific Christian form of myth-making endemic to practically all human societies.' Paul Hollenbach, 'The Historical Jesus Question in North America Today', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989), pp.11-22.

⁴ '...if the eleven disciples with Peter at their head, on the basis of appearances of the resurrected Jesus so difficult for us to comprehend, and completely unprompted, reached the view that Jesus was the the Son of Man exalted to God, knowing that in reality he had been merely a simple proclaimer of the imminent kingdom of God, a rabbi and a prophet, knowing nothing at all of eschatological offices, dignities and titles, did they not then completely falsify the pure (and so unmythologically modern sounding) intention of their master? Does not the Christian faith then not rest on a grandiose self-deception? Is it not the case that not only Judas, but also the disciples, wallowing in messianic mythology against their master's will, were -- viewed historically -- at bottom betrayers of Jesus, since they misunderstood his cause as thoroughly as it could possibly be misunderstood? (Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (T.& T.Clark, 1995), pp.14-5)

⁵ 'The view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that these two things make sense within the world of first century Judaism' (E.P.Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p.2).

⁶ W.R.Telford, 'Major Trends and Interpretative Issues in the Study of Jesus' in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of current Research*, eds. B.Chilton & C.A.Evans (E.J.Brill, 1994), pp33-74; Marcus J.Borg, 'Reflections on a discipline: A North American Perspective', *op.cit.*, pp.9-31.

⁷ Gerd Theissen's *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1978) is a key work.

⁸ Sean Freyne, 'The Geography, Politics and Economics of Galilee' in *Studying the Historical Jesus* p76.

⁹ *Jesus and Faith, : A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan's 'The Historical Jesus'*, eds., J.Carlson & R.A.Ludwig, (Orbis, 1994), ed. Carlson & Ludwig, p.20.

¹⁰ J.Carlson, 'Crossan's Jesus and Christian Identity' in *Jesus and Faith*, p.38.

¹¹ J.D.Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (T.& T.Clark, 1991), pp.308-9

¹² *op.cit.*, p.304.

¹³ *op.cit.*, p.422.

¹⁴ *op.cit.*, p.360.

¹⁵ *Jesus and Faith*, p.16.

¹⁶ Crossan works with a fivefold popular typology against a backdrop of first-century Palestinian peasant turmoil, ranging from: the human violence of the bandit leader, the human and divine violence of the messianic claimant, the exclusively divine violence of the millennial prophet, the nonviolence of the protester, the magician. 'Jesus is closest to that fifth type rather than to, say, a millennial or apocalyptic prophet like John the Baptist...' (*The Historical Jesus*, p.421)

¹⁷ Ben F.Meyer, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993), pp.575-6.

¹⁸ In addition to *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979), Meyer's article on 'Jesus Christ' in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 3, pp.773-96 seems to me the best short treatment of the historical Jesus.

¹⁹ Cf J.McDade, 'Jesus: Peasant Messiah or Master Builder?', *The Month* (November 1995), pp.439-45.

²⁰ N.T.Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* Vol 2 (SPCK, 1996), p.201.

²¹ Margaret Barker, *The Risen Lord: the Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith* (T.&T.Clark, 1996).

²² Barker, *Op.cit.*, p.51.

²³ Barker, *Op.cit.*, pp.109-110.