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The historical Jesus

James G. Crossley

Perhaps not unfairly, I have sometimes been accused by Christian scholars of both liberal and conservative dispositions of having too many conservative evangelical traits when it comes to the historical Jesus. For example, I think that there is a lot of useful historical information about Jesus' life and teaching that can be gleaned from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (though not John – see my chapter on the Gospels). To add to the confusion, I believe the following: famous terms for Jesus such as 'son of man' and 'son of God' really were being used by or of Jesus when he was alive; Jesus really did practise healing and exorcism; and Jesus really did predict his imminent death and probably thought it had some important atoning function. So why bother writing a chapter that sounds, so far at least, *virtually evangelical*?

One key point of difference here is not simply facts but *interpretation* of the facts. In each case mentioned above, and for all the dramatic claims that Jesus may have made, I do not think there were any claims made that were too out of the ordinary in Jesus' first-century context. I do not think there was anything supernatural at work, or, better, at least nothing that cannot be paralleled cross-culturally. I should also add further remarks concerning what will become the wider narrative thread in my contributions to this book, namely, that Jesus and Christianity were the product of broader social, economic and historical trends. It was, I would stress, Jesus' reactions in this context – intentionally or, as I think is more likely, unintentionally – that tapped into these trends and got the ball rolling in the origins of Christianity. In other words, Christian origins are perfectly explicable in terms of normal this-worldly historical explanation and Jesus plays a small part in such developments.

I have mentioned that crucial developments in distinguishing Christianity as a religion in its own right involved Law, Gentiles and Christology and that these will be the focus of my contributions to this book. The historical figure of Jesus and the ways in which he did – and did not – contribute to these crucial developments is our first task and it should

become clear that Jesus' socio-economic context can shed some light on this.

Jesus growing up

Jesus was born sometime close to the end of the first century BCE in Galilee. If we judge Jesus' birth as presented by Matthew and Luke in terms of conventional historical standards, my guess is that we would have to say that we know next to nothing about the specifics of Jesus' birth other than that the circumstances were probably like that of any conventional peasant birth and that he had two normal human parents, probably Joseph and Mary. There were plenty of dramatic stories in the ancient world about the births (and deaths) of figures deemed significant, including rulers such as Alexander the Great. In Jewish tradition, there are stories of the matriarchs giving birth where God directly intervenes. The retellings of these stories are also significant and, as Roger Aus has shown in detail, there are plenty of close parallels between Matthew's story of Mary and the stories of certain matriarchs in rabbinic literature.¹ In all these cases, it would be extremely difficult to find historians who would take them as anything other than imaginative storytelling and, by the standards of conventional historical research, there is no good reason why the Gospel accounts of the miraculous conception of Jesus should be taken any differently. But even if the source for Matthew and Luke got (say) material from Mary herself, we are then left with the problem of Mary telling a bemused Joseph and the world that the reason she mysteriously became pregnant was because the Holy Spirit made her so. (How many fiancés can you see buying that?)

Incidentally, the principle of parallel stories in the ancient world applies to miracles in general. Miracles were attributed to different figures across the ancient world and so it is unsurprising that miracles attributed to Jesus occur in the Gospels and, by the standards of conventional historical research, they are of little historical value in the reconstruction of the events of Jesus' life. I will return to the dubious use of the miraculous in historical research in my chapter on resurrection. In contrast, there are far more significant issues in terms of explaining Christian origins. There are a whole range of interesting details of social history that can illuminate what it might have been like for Jesus growing up in Nazareth, but two key events probably would have shaped his life and the emergence of

¹ R. D. Aus, *Matthew 1—2 and the Virginal Conception in Light of Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaic Traditions on the Birth of Israel's First Redeemer Moses* (Studies in Judaism; Landham: University Press of America, 2004).

Christianity more than any other: the building and rebuilding of two major urban centres in Galilee, Tiberias and Sepphoris respectively.²

These building projects are important for the historical study of Jesus and Christian origins because social historians have pointed out that social change involving urbanization can lead to peasant unrest, with reactions ranging from utopias to millenarian movements.³ There are endless and important debates over whether urbanization was a benefit for the Galilean populace but in terms of social change this does not necessarily matter too much. What is important, as social historians have pointed out, is the *perception* that new change is for the worse.⁴ We know that there were dramatic changes in Galilee and not everyone thought such changes were for the better. For example, by the time of the Jewish war of 66–70 CE, the Jewish historian Josephus records that there was great hatred toward Sepphoris and Tiberias. We also have a stress on harsh socio-economic conditions across the Gospel tradition (Mark 12.1–12; Matt. 5.25/Luke 12.57–59; Matt. 5.40; Matt. 5.42/Luke 6.35; Matt. 6.12; 18.23–35; Matt. 9.37–38; 20.1–8; 25.31–46; Luke 4.18; 6.20–21; 13.27; 15.17; 16.1–8; 19—21), suggesting that there were voices recorded in this tradition who did not think social change was for the better.

This social background can explain a great deal about the emergence of Jesus' ministry. There are various reasons to suggest that it was not just coincidence that the Jesus movement emerged in Galilee at the time of undeniable social change and it is to these reasons we now turn.

In general terms, it has long been noted that Jesus appears similar to the prophetic-type figures (e.g. John the Baptist in Matt. 3 and Theudas in Acts 5.36) who emerged during the period of Roman influence and rule in Palestine. Furthermore, while Jesus was no bandit, he did have some very harsh things to say about the rich. In the ferocious Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19–31), the poor man Lazarus gets reward in the afterlife whereas the rich man goes straight to a fiery afterlife. There is no mention in this parable that the rich man suffers because he abused his wealth or the like. He suffers for the simple reason that he is rich. This

² See, e.g., J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 151–235.

³ See, e.g., J. C. Scott, 'Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part I', *Theory and Society* 4 (1977), 1–38 (e.g. 17); J. C. Scott, 'Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part II', *Theory and Society* 4 (1977), 211–46; J. H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982), 318.

⁴ See, e.g., E. J. Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1998), 224.

is the only reason the parable gives: ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony’ (Luke 16.25).

Comments such as these are significant because there was a long tradition grounded in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament of wealth being a sign of blessing here on earth. This continued into the Judaism at the time of Jesus. However, in times of serious social change, the obvious injustices of such ‘reward theology’ can get highlighted. In broadly contemporaneous Judaism, the document *1 Enoch* reversed reward theology so that rewards and riches in this life were no longer a sign of favour but were actually a sign that an individual was damned! True rewards will come in the life to come.

Jesus was following in the footsteps of *1 Enoch* in his attacks on the rich. We have already seen the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus but the logic and problems of critiquing traditional ‘reward theology’ are perhaps most worked out in Mark 10.17–31. Mark 10.17–31 as a whole may or may not go back to an incident in Jesus’ life but it certainly reflects ideas surrounding the problems of rich people not *really* being blessed on earth. The unusualness of the shift in reward from this life to the life to come is the best historical explanation for the perplexed reactions of the disciples (Mark 10.24, 26). That this passage as a whole held such sharp views on wealth gains further confirmation from the fact that textual traditions felt the need to alter the passage to make it more palatable for the more wealthy Christians (10.24, 25). Obviously, this would not have been done if in the passage Jesus’ teaching on wealth was not so disturbingly stark.

There is some evidence that Jesus’ teaching had some concern for the repentance of the rich. People of some means were far more likely to serve mammon, store up treasures on earth (Matt. 6.19–21; Luke 12.33–34), worry about what clothes to wear, what food to eat, and about prosperity (Matt. 6.25–34; Luke 12.22–32), a view made clear in *1 Enoch* (*1 Enoch* 97–98, 102). This concern for the repentance of the rich was also reflected in Jesus’ controversial association with people labelled ‘the sinners’ (cf. Mark 2.15–17; Matt. 11.19/Luke 7.34; Luke 15.1–2) who, contrary to popular belief, were not the common everyday folk looked down on by people like the Pharisees. Rather, whenever the phrase ‘the sinners’ occurs in early Judaism and whenever social class is mentioned these people are always identified as rich or, to be more precise, oppressive rich,⁵ and it is notable

⁵ J. G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins* 26–50 CE (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), chapter 3.

that the sinners are associated with tax collectors and good living in the Gospel tradition (Mark 2.15–17; Matt. 11.19/Luke 7.34; Luke 15.1–2; 19.1–9). As with Jesus' teaching on the rich, it appears that Jesus called for such people to *repent* (cf. Mark 2.15–17; 14.3; Luke 15; 19.1–9; cf. Luke 7.36–50), which in early Judaism meant fellow Jews perceived to be wrongdoers (re-)turning to proper observance of the commandments and renouncing their previous ways. But whether or not Jesus was successful in getting such unpleasant people like 'sinners' and tax collectors to repent is another question.

Kingdom of God

I noted above that in the context of social change associated with urbanization projects such as Tiberias and Sepphoris, millenarian and utopian ideals were often found in reactions stemming from the peasantry. An excellent example of this is Jesus' teaching on the 'kingdom of God'.

It is widely agreed that Jesus, like Jews before and after him, used the term 'kingdom of God'. Precisely what Jesus *meant* by kingdom of God is not so clear. In general terms I would go along with those who suggest that for Jesus the phrase referred to the kingdom of both the present and the future. What *present* might generally mean for many Jews from around Jesus' time is that God rules the entire universe, as we see in the book of Daniel (Dan. 4.31–32). But it was clear that Jews were not ruling the world and that the world was far from being a perfect place for Jews – even though their God ruled all – or indeed virtually anyone else in the ancient world. Consequently, God's kingdom would come in the *future*, about which the book of Daniel was also clear (Dan. 2.44; cf. Dan. 7).

The book of Daniel is a good example because it holds both present and future kingdoms together without seeing this as a contradiction, just like the Gospel tradition does. Think of a passage like Mark 4.30–32 where Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed which is small but it grows and eventually becomes the greatest of the shrubs. The book of Daniel is also a good example because we know from reading between the lines of the work of the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus that Daniel was being read in dramatic terms where the present rulers of the world, Rome, would be overthrown by a final kingdom.

Quite what this dramatic new kingdom would look like is uncertain and many answers are educated guesses. There has been some heated debate as to whether this was a literal 'end-of-the-world' scenario or more down-to-earth socio-political change. It is actually very difficult to be precise because we do not have surveys of what people thought and there are no convenient explanations in the Gospel tradition. It is sometimes argued

that first-century people would not have read a lot of the dramatic language associated with predictions of times to come (e.g. Mark 1.15; 9.1) literally because they were ‘sophisticated’ readers or the like. Yet, for all we know, among Jesus’ audience there may well have been a range of interpreters, some interpreting more ‘symbolically’ or ‘metaphorically’ than others, just as there have been in different societies throughout human history. But we can say that in the tradition in which Jesus found himself there was an expectation for God to intervene dramatically in human history. Indeed some, such as people responsible for a commentary on the book of Habakkuk, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, predicted the date of the ‘end times’ and got it wrong, as they virtually admitted when talking of the final age being prolonged (1QpHab 7).

A big question is this: when did *Jesus* think that the kingdom of God would arrive? This has been a real problem for Christian scholars because there has been a powerful scholarly tradition arguing that Jesus predicted the imminent kingdom within the lifetime of some of his audience. Jesus was not as specific as the Habakkuk Commentary from the Dead Sea Scrolls but he was precise enough. As Jesus says in Mark 9.1, ‘there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power’. This reflects other teachings of Jesus which are not quite as specific but do point to something happening soon (e.g. Mark 1.15). This means that, like the Habakkuk Commentary from the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jesus got his prediction wrong. The earliest Christians, including Paul, continued to believe something dramatic was going to happen soon. Yet when those who had stood by Jesus were no longer alive the timeframe was stretched too far, causing problems for the first Christians. John’s Gospel, for example, written towards the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, drops all references to ‘the kingdom of God’ save two where the kingdom of God now refers to entry into John’s version of Christianity (John 3), not to mention John’s problems with the second coming not happening (John 21). Like the authors of the Habakkuk Commentary, Christians had to deal with the problem of a mistaken prediction by employing creative reinterpretation (cf. 2 Peter 3).

Law and conflict

When discussing the role of the Law in the teaching of Jesus it is important to think of the Law or, what Jews would call the Torah (effectively the first five books of the Bible and the laws and commandments they contain), on two levels: (1) biblical law, that is, the laws as explicitly stated in the Bible; and (2) the interpretation or expansion of biblical law to new situations. It is often thought, especially by many Christian interpreters,

that when Jesus comes into conflict over the Law in the Gospel tradition, he is rejecting the former, that is the validity of biblical laws, when in fact it is clear, at least from the Synoptic Gospels, that Jesus' disputes with his contemporaries concern the latter, that is, some of the *interpretations* or *expansions* of biblical law.

I do not think that Jesus ever doubted the validity of the biblical laws. In fact, in some instances Jesus endorsed certain *expansions* or *interpretations* of the Law. A classic case of many people believing that Jesus overrode or rejected biblical law when in fact he was actually engaging with interpretation or expansion of biblical law is that connected with the 'eye for an eye' ruling of Exodus 21.24. Matthew 5.38–42 records the strongest version of the contrast: 'But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.' Unlike other Gospel traditions concerning the Law, we are not told that Jesus' words here led to conflict, something we would surely have expected if Jesus had done something as dramatic as overturn a commandment. But this lack of conflict should not be surprising because Jesus does not do anything so dramatic. From the available evidence, it seems that the dominant interpretation of Exodus 21.24, at least among the Pharisees and later rabbis, was that it should definitely *not* be interpreted literally in terms of violent retribution. We see in Jewish legal sources, particularly in those written down by the rabbis, that if someone was injured then financial compensation was the way to resolve the situation (e.g. *m. B. Qam* 8.1; *b. B. Qam* 83b–84a; *Tg. Ps.-J. Exod. 21.24*; *Mek. Exod. 21.24* [III:67–69]). However, there were literal, violent interpretations of Exodus 21.24 against which groups such as the Pharisees reacted (cf. *Jub.* 4.31; *m. Mak.* 1.6). It appears that the words attributed to Jesus stand in this tradition of rejecting the violent interpretation.

Jesus' rejection of the violent interpretation of Exodus 21.24 would have some relevance if at least some of Jesus' teachings were aimed at people deemed 'sinners', people who we saw could have had some skills in the area of violent retaliation. Of course, it will take more historical investigation to show whether or not Jesus interpreted Exodus 21.24 but, as Jesus was never said to react against the non-violent interpretation, it would be extremely difficult to make the traditional case that Jesus rejected outright the biblical law of Exodus 21.24.

But how do we explain Jesus' view of the Law causing conflict with those dedicated to the expansion of the Law? For a start it seems fairly clear that groups in early Judaism did engage in some heated debates, as Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the first century CE, tells us (*Ant.* 13.297–98). Such disputes among groups could range from the basic argument to the

particularly brutal, such as the disputes between the people responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls and their opponents (e.g. 4Q171 4).

Let us take the example of Sabbath observance because this is one of the areas where Jesus clashes with opponents over the interpretation of the Law. The following example is a Jewish dispute over whether fallen fruit should be picked up on the Sabbath, an *expansion* of biblical law that is paralleled at the time of Jesus (*Jub.* 2.29; CD 10.17–23; *Philo, Mos.* 2.22): ‘Six rules did the men of Jericho make . . . For three the Sages criticised them . . . [2] they eat on the Sabbath fruit which had fallen under a tree . . . (*m. Pesah* 4.8)’.

We might compare this with the dispute over the plucking of grain on the Sabbath in Mark 2.23–28: ‘One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (Mark 2.23–24)’. Nowhere in biblical law is plucking grain on the Sabbath forbidden so we must be dealing with a dispute over the interpretation and expansion of biblical law.

As with other disputes over the interpretation of biblical law, the Gospels suggest that Jesus’ disputes over the Sabbath were bitter. Think of Mark 3.6 which is the response to Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath. This incident comes just after Jesus has been accused by the Pharisees of unlawfully plucking grain on the Sabbath in Mark 2.23–28. In Mark 3.1–6 it appears that Jesus is developing a key aspect of Sabbath law in early Judaism by controversially extending the long-established principle that the duty to save life, which includes his healing ministry, overrules the duty to observe the Sabbath (cf. 1 Macc. 2.40–41). Compare the following:

Any matter of doubt as to danger to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath. (*m. Yoma* 8.6)

Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill? (Mark 3.4)

All the above Sabbath discussion shows that the Sabbath disputes mentioned in the Gospels were very much at home in an early Jewish context and had little concern for Christianity. Whether or not they precisely go back to the life and teaching of Jesus, they show that the key synoptic evidence does not have Jesus contradicting any biblical Sabbath law.

Other disputes were not portrayed as escalating out of control. Mark 7.1–23 is a very good example of Jesus being remembered as a figure who clashed over interpretation of the Law. It has scribes and Pharisees asking

why Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before eating ordinary food. The role of hand-washing in Pharisaic and rabbinic thought requires much more detailed analysis than is usually given when discussed in historical Jesus and Gospel studies, but in basic terms hand-washing is an expansion of biblical purity laws designed to keep the insides pure by preventing the transmission of impurity from hands-to-food-to-eater via the ultra-defiling nature of a liquid. Jesus' response in Mark 7.15 appears to be a rejection of this expansion of biblical purity laws.

This would already imply that Jesus kept the biblical purity laws. It may seem strange to many Christians that Jesus observed biblical purity laws but there is nothing in the synoptic tradition that has Jesus attacking any biblical purity law. Sometimes people refer to Jesus coming into contact with impure people (e.g. Mark 5) but this happened to many Jews all the time. If they could, all they had to do was to make themselves pure again through the regulations set out in scriptural texts.

There are other disputes over the interpretation recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Matt. 23) and in all cases there is no serious evidence that Jesus' view went beyond the boundaries of disputes known in early Judaism. Whether all of the Gospel passages discussed above go back to the historical Jesus requires a great deal more analysis than can be offered here but the key point to note is that there is a strong tradition of Jesus being engaged in internal Jewish legal disputes that have little to do with what is known about the early Church after Jesus' death. As the early Church was including more and more non-observant people from an early date (approximately 10 to 15 years after Jesus' death – see my chapter on Paul) then there is a strong chance that this tradition of Jesus as legal debater stems from the historical Jesus himself.

Jesus' last week

Whatever we make of Mark 3.6, Jesus' actions on the Sabbath did not manage to get him killed. Instead, Jesus appears to have been killed for doing something in the Jerusalem Temple (Mark 11.15–17). So what did Jesus do that was so upsetting? The traditional view that Jesus pushed for the end of the sacrificial system never had any serious evidence to support it. Rather it appears that Jesus was angry over perceived economic exploitation of poorer people.⁶ Note the stress on the economic aspects of the Temple in Mark 11.15–18.

⁶ C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), chapter 9.

We know that Jesus was not the only first-century Jew concerned with the role of the dove-sellers. The first-century figure Simon ben Gamaliel was strongly critical of the inflated price of doves for sacrifice (*m. Ker.* 1.7). Similarly, the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g. 1QpHab) were extremely critical of what they perceived as a corrupt Temple that exploited people. In this context, the words of Jesus make sense when he contrasts what he sees as the ideal function of the Temple ('a house of prayer') with what he hyperbolically sees as its present state ('a den of robbers').

It is sometimes argued that Jesus' action in the Temple was an instance of symbolic destruction. While a case can be made for Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple owing to its present corruption, possibly hoping for its rebuilding (cf. Mark 14.58–59; 15.29), I am not convinced that his actions in the Temple were an act of prophetic symbolism. When prophetic actions are described in the scriptures they are usually explained and explicitly *interpreted* (e.g. Isa. 20.3; Jer. 19.1–13; 27–28; Ezek. 4–5; 12.1–16; 24.15–24). As there is no such explanation in Mark 11 it is difficult to accept such a view.

Another common argument related to Jesus' actions in the Temple is that Jesus established an alternative Temple system and took on an alternative role as priest or high priest, all in opposition to the Jerusalem Temple system. This seems to me to be letting Christian theology sneak into the debate under the pretence of Jesus' 'Jewish-ness', the common idea that Jesus *is* Jewish . . . but not *that* Jewish. And I am not just being overly suspicious here either.

For a start, no one in the synoptic tradition criticizes Jesus for starting an alternative Temple movement or setting himself up as an alternative priest or high priest, something we might expect had Jesus done something so dramatic. There is also nothing in the synoptic tradition which has Jesus replacing the Temple system.⁷ Some people think that the reference to sins being 'forgiven' in Mark 2.1–12 has Jesus taking on a priestly function. However, it is not entirely clear how the Greek ought to be translated: it could equally be talking about sins being 'released', a vivid image of the paralysed man able to move his limbs again. But even if we translate it as 'forgiven', the phrase uses a 'divine passive' to suggest that the forgiveness comes from God ('your sins have been forgiven [by God]') and God was more than capable of forgiving sins outside the Temple in early Judaism (e.g. Ecclus. 3.30). Additionally, Jesus is assumed to have had an entirely positive attitude toward the ideal function of the Temple,

⁷ See now the critique in D. Catchpole, *Jesus People: The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Community* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

even if he thought the present system corrupt. Look at Mark 1.44; Matt. 5.23–24; and 23.16–22, for instance.

So if we have passages favouring the ideal function of the Temple, no clear passages where Jesus says he replaces the Temple, and no explicit criticism of Jesus starting up an alternative system, then it is historically more plausible that Jesus accepted the ideal function of the Temple and did not set himself up in contrast to the Temple.

After his actions in the Temple, Jesus would have been well aware that he could be killed. In fact there is a good chance that Jesus knew he would have been killed prior to his actions in the Temple. His mentor, John the Baptist, had already been killed for prophetic activities, so Jesus would have to expect the worst. It also seems that Jesus developed a martyr theology whereby his death would have some benefit for others. In a tradition of martyrdom recalled annually at the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, there was a significant development whereby the sacrifice of the martyrs had some kind of atoning function for Jews with reference to the Law (e.g. 2 Macc. 7).

There are some Gospel traditions which point to a clear atoning function, such as Mark 10.45; 14.24. We might expect that if Jesus said such things he is best understood following martyr theology in early Judaism. But do not these traditions say that Jesus' death is for 'the many'? Well, yes, obviously; but we should not get carried away with the idea that this phrase refers to all humanity, Jew and gentile alike. We know that this phrase is used in early Judaism to refer to a particular group. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the phrase 'the many' referred to the group (probably the Essenes) responsible for writing and collecting the scrolls (e.g. 1QS 6; CD 13.7; 14.7). It does not necessarily follow, therefore, that if Jesus used the phrase 'the many' in a context where his death was seen to have an atoning function he was making reference beyond the boundaries of Judaism in any significant way.

Moreover, if Jesus did develop a martyr theology, there is further evidence that he would have been concerned with Jews *primarily*. The reason for this is that typical of Jesus' ministry was a *primary* concern for Jews with little concern for Gentiles (see especially Matt. 10.5–6). Jesus' meeting with a gentile woman in Mark 7.24–30 (if accurate) is portrayed as exceptional but does imply that Gentiles will get something; Gentiles are, though, definitely second-class citizens in the times to come: 'Let the children [Jews] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs [Gentiles]' (Mark 7.27; at cf. Matt. 5.47; Luke 12.30/Matt. 6.32). There are some passages which are sometimes read as a future and better hope for the Gentiles (e.g. Luke 10.13–14/Matt. 11.20–22; Luke

11.31–32/Matt. 12.41–42; Matt. 8.11–12/Luke 13.28–29), which would be in line with some mainstream Jewish views, but even here there has been some questioning of whether gentile salvation is even in mind in such passages.

Who was Jesus? – Healer and exorcist? Son of Man? Son of God? Messiah?

Jesus was famously remembered as someone who healed the sick and exorcized demons. It is often pointed out that this material does not show too many signs of interference by the early Church and could well reflect events from the life of Jesus. In fact, Jesus was hardly the only healer and exorcist around, as he notes himself (Mark 9.38–40), and as we know from non-Christian sources (e.g. Josephus, *Ant.* 8.45–49). But it should be stressed that this does not mean that there is something supernatural or miraculous happening. In Jesus' culture, illness and disease were interpreted in terms of the demonic. Yes, Jesus may well have healed people and have been perceived to have exorcized demons but this is nothing new in a cross-cultural context. Psychosomatic illnesses, including things similar to what the Gospel writers called a 'paralytic' (someone unable to move their limbs properly; cf. Mark 2.1–12), with accompanying healing by a traditional authoritative healer, are attested in many cultures, as are acts perceived to be exorcisms. Clearly these issues can be explained as social and psychological in origin and there is, in terms of historical analysis, no good reason why we should make an exception for Jesus' healings and exorcisms.

According to the Gospel tradition, 'the Son of Man' was a title for Jesus. That this was actually a significant *title* for Jesus during his lifetime is highly unlikely. The 'son of man problem' is notoriously difficult but some basic comments can be made. First, in Aramaic, the language in which Jesus spoke, the phrase in its most basic form simply means 'man' or 'human being'. Second, there was no dramatic title 'the Son of Man' in early Judaism. Many scholars refer to Daniel 7.13, 'I saw one like a human being [literally, 'son of man'] coming with the clouds of heaven' (NRSV). But 'son of man' simply means 'a human being', as the NRSV translation makes clear. Third, at the time of Jesus, the phrase 'son of man' was not a Greek phrase (though it occurs in translations of Semitic texts), and when translated into Greek it not only sounds unusual for a Greek speaker but also has a stronger force with the potential for sounding like a title. We will return to this in due course. Fourth, those suggestions by certain evangelical scholars (e.g. N. T. Wright) that the use of the term based on Daniel 7.13 can in some way be used to refer to the fall of Jerusalem are problematic for a

number of reasons, the primary one being that there is no use whereby anyone might possibly understand the phrase meaning ‘human being’ to be referring to Jerusalem issues or anything related.⁸

I just said that the basic form of the phrase ‘son of man’ in Aramaic refers to ‘man’ or ‘human being’. We now need to make some qualifications. The phrase can use the Aramaic equivalent of the English and Greek definite article, ‘the’, though it does not have to do so. In other words, the Aramaic phrase can be literally translated ‘the son of man’ or ‘(a) son of man’, both meaning more or less the same thing in Aramaic. In Aramaic, the phrase takes on another usage. As experts in the area of son of man studies have shown, the phrase can be used to refer to a more general category of human beings but also with reference to the individual, not unlike the use of ‘one’ in English. It has long been noted that the Aramaic idiom is often used in situations where speakers find themselves in contexts of danger or death, or in situations requiring humility or modesty: all such themes are echoed in son of man sayings in the Gospels and may reflect an underlying Aramaic idiom used by the historical Jesus.⁹

There are several examples in the teaching of Jesus where the phrase is used in a fairly conventional Aramaic sense. Perhaps the clearest example is in Mark 2.23–28. After a dispute over the Sabbath, Jesus says the following: ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath’ (Mark 2.27–28). Based on this saying alone, it would seem that there is some parallelism in verses 27–28, allowing the saying to have a general frame of reference but with particular reference also to the speaker, Jesus. The general element picks up generalized sayings concerning the authority of humans over the Sabbath in early Judaism (cf. Exod. 16.29; *Jub.* 2.17; *Mek.* Exod. 31.12–17). But there is a clear implication in the Marcan passage that Jesus is defending and referring to his own argument on Sabbath observance. A further argument in favour of the general-yet-specific son of man usage in the teaching of Jesus is how Matthew and Luke deal with Mark 2.27–28: both drop the general Mark 2.27 (‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath’) and keep 2.28 (‘so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath’) thereby heightening the reference to Jesus alone and dropping the idiomatic use of son of man retained in Mark.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

⁹ For a comprehensive study see now M. Casey, *The Solution to the ‘Son of Man’ Problem* (London and New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2007).

There are son of man sayings that are clearly inventions of the early Church. In Mark 13.26 there is a clear reference to Daniel 7.13, ‘Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory.’ Yet Mark 13 is almost entirely secondary and tells us more about the early Church than the historical Jesus.¹⁰ The saying also refers to the second coming of Jesus, an idea developed by the early Church and not by the historical Jesus. The similar saying in Mark 14.62 does not have a strong case for being authentic either. For a start, it seems like a second coming saying. But it was supposedly said during Jesus’ trial (itself historically problematic) so it immediately becomes questionable: how did the Gospel tradition come across what Jesus supposedly said? And should we not be a little suspicious that Mark came across a saying of Jesus that perfectly mirrored his own Christianized theology?

But, clearly, ‘the Son of Man’ did become a title for Jesus at some point. The probable reason for this process from an Aramaic idiom to a Greek title is that Jesus used the phrase of himself with reference to others but when translated into Greek it is not only unusual but can also take on a form of a title, as it would if translated into English: *the* Son of Man. The phrase simply does not have this titular force in Aramaic. All this means that the phrase ‘son of man’ is an Aramaic idiom that was used by Jesus and many other people in early Judaism but did not denote anything particularly special and places Jesus firmly within Judaism with no concern for starting anything radically new in the sense that he would be *the* Son of Man to inaugurate a new age for all, or anything like that.

In an even more negative sense, the phrase ‘son of God’ does not necessarily denote the second person of the Trinity, the most unbelievable human being with major divine characteristics, or anything of the kind. As has long been noted, the phrase ‘son of God’, in early Judaism at least, can have a range of meanings, from Israelites, good Jews and kings to angelic figures (e.g. Gen. 6.2, 4; Exod. 4.22; Deut. 32.5–6, 18–19; 32.8; 2 Sam. 7.14; Ps. 2.7; 29.1; 89.7; Jer. 31.20; Dan. 3.25; Hos. 11.1). Tellingly, later Jewish literature could say that God called the charismatic Hanina ben Dosa ‘my son’ (*b. Ta’an.* 24b; *b. Ber.* 17b; *b. Hul.* 86a). This example (among many others) shows how deeply embedded the language of God’s son was in Judaism because it continued long after the highly elevated uses in Christianity were established.

¹⁰ See J. G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (London and New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004), 19–43.

Jesus as ‘son of God’ was a favourite title of the early Christian Church.¹¹ But it was also one that was developing and being reinterpreted from a very early time, already suggesting that Jesus may have used it – assuming for the moment that he used it at all – in a more mundane sense. Matthew edits Mark to stress the stronger sense of the term ‘Son’ (Mark 6.52/Matt. 14.33; Mark 8.29/Matt. 16.16; Mark 15.30/Matt. 27.40; Mark 15.32/Matt. 27.43). With John’s Gospel the phrase ‘the Son of God’ is used in an extremely strong sense where equality with God is explicitly mentioned (e.g. John 5). There is nothing like this in the Synoptic Gospels so presumably the historical Jesus never said anything similar to that which appears in John’s Gospel, otherwise it is almost incomprehensible that the other Gospels would have left it out. We also have another strong saying in material common to Matthew and Luke where coming to God is through the Son alone (Matt. 11.27/Luke 10.22), an issue to which I shall return in my chapter on the Gospels. This too is suggestive of later invention as it is a Christianized formulation not developed elsewhere in the Synoptic Gospels, something we might expect with such a dramatic saying. Calling Jesus ‘the Son (of God)’ is therefore an observable development (see my chapter on Paul).

The strongest case for Jesus being described as God’s Son is in the context of Jesus’ exorcisms (e.g. Mark 3.11; 5.7). In this sense, it is more like the Jewish charismatic figures such as Hanina ben Dosa than any claim to be the actual Son of God.¹² Again, once Christians started to develop the figure of Jesus after his death it is not difficult to see how the more spectacular use of ‘Son of God’ would have contributed to making Jesus the one and only Son of God. Another strong case for Jesus using related language is his use of ‘father’ in contexts which would imply that he was a good son, like other good Jews. The teaching of Jesus as son coheres remarkably well with figures such as Honi the Circle-Drawer, the first-century Jewish holy man believed to be a miracle worker:

Simeon b. Shatah said to him, ‘. . . For you importune before the Omnipresent, so he does what you want, like a son who importunes his father, so he does what he wants.’
(*m. Ta’an.* 3.8)

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are

¹¹ M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), 44–46.

¹² On Jesus and charismatic holy men, see esp. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

(Matt. 7.9–11; cf. Matt. 6.9–13; Luke 11.2–4, 11–13)

The term ‘the Messiah’ (literally, ‘anointed’; ‘Christ’ in Greek) was another key term for the first Christians. It is, however, unlikely that Jesus used it of himself: he does not use it in the earliest Gospel, Mark, and it does not occur in our other earliest source behind Matthew and Luke, a hypothetical source conventionally labelled ‘Q’. Conversely, the title is widely used in New Testament and other early Christian documents. Moreover, the phrase ‘the Messiah’ was probably not a technical title in early Judaism at the time of Jesus. It has long been noted not only that there are different types of ‘messianic’ figures (e.g. priestly, royal, prophetic) but also that the word ‘Messiah’ was qualified in early Judaism to describe what kind of ‘messiah’ or anointed figure was in mind.¹³ For example, one document from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q252 5) refers to ‘the Messiah of righteousness, the branch of David’. Consequently, there was no such absolute title ‘the Messiah’ by the time of Jesus. I would suggest that the reason why Christians crystallized these separate strands into an absolute title, ‘*the* Messiah’, was to make Jesus the not-to-be-rivalled, not-to-be-contested, supreme figure in early Judaism, ruling out any potential rivals from priestly, royal and prophetic strands in this all-encompassing term.

Conclusions

We have seen throughout this chapter that Jesus – for all the dramatic claims he may have made – does not do anything unparalleled in early Judaism. He remains a figure within Judaism and had little, if any, concern for developing his message among the Gentiles/non-Jews, let alone starting a new religion. Critics of the reconstruction of Jesus as a ‘fairly ordinary’ human being, such as the figure I have presented, argue that such a figure could not have started a movement among the Gentiles, let alone sown the seeds of a new religion. Such views tend to ignore conventional historical developments and long-, medium- and short-term trends (social, economic, political, etc.) and focus far too heavily on Jesus’ ideas being the most important spur. This owes too much to the figure of Jesus being the centre of Christian theology and little to a conventional historical mindset. We will return to the role of the individual Jesus and the broader historical trends in due course, but in the next chapter I will turn to the other

¹³ M. de Jonge, ‘The Use of the Word “Anointed” in the Time of Jesus’, *Novum Testamentum* 8 (1966), 132–48.

classic argument, usually from evangelical circles, for the development of Christianity: the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Michael F. Bird

Several years ago I was speaking at a church in Brisbane, Australia, to a group of Asian university students about Jesus. After this particular sermon a young Japanese student asked: ‘What is Jesus?’ She was apparently confused by what the subject matter of my sermon even was. By analogy I’m asking something similar here: what and who is the historical Jesus? I think the question is an important one. Who is the flesh-and-blood human being called Jesus of Nazareth who walked the plains of Palestine and the shores of the Sea of Galilee? Who is the man who earned the fury of the Judean leadership, who was crucified on a Roman cross, and was so *remembered* by Christians in the first century as the Son of God? That is what I am setting out to address in this chapter.

The historical Jesus

For a working definition we might say that the historical Jesus is the picture of Jesus that emerges through the application of historical tools and by the formation of historical hypotheses. The ‘historical Jesus’ is not a positivistic or objective history of Jesus, but it comprises a fallible portrait of Jesus that emerges from dialogue with the textual history of early Christianity and in partnership with other readers of that history.¹⁴ We must also keep in mind that regardless of how the early Church interpreted the significance of Jesus it did not abandon his historical message and person. Ernst Käsemann argued that the primitive Church never lost interest in the life history of Jesus as being properly basic for faith.¹⁵ Since ‘Jesus’ is not a metaphor for a cache of timeless theological truths we are committed, whether we like it or not, to the task of exploring and investigating the person of Jesus in his historical context. To know Christ is more than knowing that he is divine and human, more than knowing that he died for our sins; it is a matter of knowing about his teachings and understanding how Jesus relates to Israel, to his followers and to his own contemporaries. This would suggest that historical study of Jesus is in fact a

¹⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (LNTS 331; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 23; and see also the excellent discussion in Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2005), 28–46.

¹⁵ Ernst Käsemann, ‘The Problem of the Historical Jesus’, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W. J. Montague; London: SCM Press, 1964).

necessary task of discipleship.¹⁶ The nature of faith (in a historical person) and the nature of God's revelation (in the sphere of space–time history) demand that we participate in what is known as the *Quest for the Historical Jesus*.¹⁷ Even if you're an atheist you need to ponder: 'Who is this Jesus that I don't believe in?' The answer might surprise the most ardent sceptics when they find out that the Jesus in whom they disbelieve is radically different from the Jesus of Nazareth.

The virgin conception

According to the Apostles' Creed, a second-century statement of faith, Jesus 'was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'. The affirmation of the virgin birth by Christians in the second century was maintained amid those who postulated a purely human birth (e.g. Cerinthus, Carpocrates and groups who became known as the Ebionites) and those who denied Jesus any human birth (e.g. Marcion).¹⁸ When Christians of the second century made belief in the virgin birth part of their creeds and confessions they were essentially following the testimony bequeathed to them in the Gospels. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew both narrate that Jesus was born through miraculous conception when the Holy Spirit came upon a young Galilean girl named Mary. This is ordinarily called the virgin birth or, more properly, the virgin conception. These stories are absent from Mark and John although we have reason to think that they might presuppose them (see, e.g., Mark 6.3; and John 8.39–41). The accounts in Luke and Matthew have their own peculiar emphases and there are variations in the details as one would expect from stories such as these that circulated orally in the early Church. Still, there appears to be a common narrative thread to the Matthean and Lucan birth narratives:

- 1 Jesus' birth in relation to the reign of Herod the Great.
- 2 Mary is a virgin, betrothed to Joseph, but their relationship is not yet consummated.
- 3 Joseph is of Davidic descent.
- 4 The birth is announced by angels.
- 5 Jesus is the Son of David.
- 6 Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000), 14–15.

¹⁷ See Michael F. Bird, 'Should Evangelicals Participate in the "Third Quest for the Historical Jesus?"', *Themelios* 29 (2004), 5–14; Michael Pahl, 'Is Jesus Lost? Evangelicals and the Search for the Historical Jesus', *Themelios* 31 (2006), 6–19.

¹⁸ Michael F. Bird, 'Birth of Jesus', in *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Craig A. Evans (New York: Routledge, 2008), 71–4.

- 7 Joseph plays no role in the conception.
- 8 The name 'Jesus' is divinely given.
- 9 An angel refers to Jesus as 'Saviour'.
- 10 Jesus is born after Mary and Joseph have come to live together.
- 11 Jesus is born in Bethlehem.
- 12 Jesus' family settles in Nazareth.¹⁹

Several reasons are often given for taking the virgin conception to be a myth dressed up in the garb of a historical narrative. First, several scholars argue that the birth stories have been written-up in order to portray Jesus as fulfilling biblical prophecy. The Lucan annunciation narratives are heavily influenced by Old Testament prototypes like the child born to Hannah (1 Sam. 1—3), and Matthew's depiction of Herod the Great parallels the account of Pharaoh's cruelty to the Hebrews and Moses' birth as national deliverer (Exod. 1—2). While it is clear that the Evangelists have modelled the birth narratives after Old Testament stories about barren women having children, it seems unlikely that they have conjured up the virgin conception out of thin air based purely on Old Testament precedents. Most barren women conceived through natural means whereas in the virgin conception we have something unparalleled in Jewish scriptural traditions. What is more, in primitive Christian exegesis the Old Testament provided the hermeneutical grid through which traditional material was interpreted and modelled rather than comprising the creative pool from which it was formulated.

Second, Matthew's quotation of the Old Testament may appear erratic at points. For instance, Matthew 1.23 cites Isaiah 7.14 which reads: 'the virgin shall conceive and bear a son'. Not only was this passage not treated as a messianic prophecy in Jewish interpretation, which associated the son with a child born during the time of Ahaz and Isaiah, but the Hebrew word '*almâh*' means a woman of marriageable age and not necessarily a virgin. The notion of virginity is probably imported from the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew text for Greek-speaking Jews) through the word *parthenos* that implies more explicitly a 'virgin'. So is Matthew a proponent of a bad translation? While '*almâh*' is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* the idea of virginity could be connoted, depending on the context. In any case, a virgin conception is clearly not predicted in the Hebrew text of Isaiah 7.14, but Matthew's citation does not demand an exact correspondence of events as much as it postulates a correlation of patterns or types between Isaiah's narrative and his own birth story. The coming

¹⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke* (2 vols; AB; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1.307.

of God's anointed, the manifestation of God's presence, and the rescue of Israel through a child born to a young girl brings to Matthew's mind Isaiah 7 as an obvious prophetic precedent again repeated at a new juncture of redemptive history.

Third, in the sphere of comparative religions certain sages or heroes were said to have been born of miraculous circumstances involving gods (e.g. Perseus, Plato, Alexander the Great). According to the Roman historian Suetonius (*Aug.* 94.4) the birth of the emperor Augustus came about by his mother being impregnated by the god Apollo. Based on these comparisons several scholars suppose that Christians borrowed from pagan birth stories and fabricated their own mythic narrative in order to make Jesus look equally heroic and divine. One should keep in mind that analogy does not mean genealogy; there is no indication that Luke and Matthew use Graeco-Roman birth stories as their sources. The birth narratives also possess a distinctive Palestinian character and reflect the piety of Jewish Christianity (especially the Lucan hymns attributed to Mary and Zechariah). Additionally, other mythic birth stories such as that of Augustus imply some human–divine sexual union which is absent from the Gospels. Thus the purported parallels are not quite as parallel as is often supposed.²⁰

What one thinks of a virgin conception will depend entirely upon what presuppositions one has and whether one believes in a God who can and does intervene in human affairs in such a way. On the one hand, miraculous birth stories are not entirely unique in the sphere of religious history and the birth narratives are invested with theological meaning by the Evangelists. On the other hand, there is a sound platform of evidence that could be said to imply a miraculous birth:

- 1 Paul speaks of Jesus as 'born of woman' (Gal. 4.4; cf. Rom. 1.3; Phil. 2.7).
- 2 Jesus is called the 'son of Mary' and not the son of Joseph in Mark 6.3.
- 3 There was in circulation a Jewish polemic that presupposes that there was something suspicious about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth including the insinuation that he was a *mamzer* or illegitimate (John 8.41; *Gos. Thom.* 105; Tertullian, *Spect.* 30.6; *Prot. Jas* 13–16; *Acts Pil.* 2.3) and born to a Roman soldier called 'Panthera', a play on the Greek word *parthenos*, meaning 'virgin' (Origen, *Cels.* 1.28, 32).
- 4 There is no reason for taking the birth narratives as being altogether different from the rest of the Gospels which contain historical

²⁰ For early Christian responses to the allegation that the virgin birth was borrowed from pagan myths of divine–human intercourse, see Justin, *Dial.* 67–70; *1 Apol.* 33; and Origen, *Cels.* 1.37.

narratives set in the parameters of a Graeco-Roman biography or historiography.²¹

Thus, while the evidence does not prove a virgin birth, it is at least consistent with it. What we can say for certain is that Jesus' paternity was enigmatic from the start.²² That is the fact that Crossley must explain and yet he does not attempt to do so other than say that historians would consider the birth accounts 'imaginative storytelling' (see page 2). Ultimately, whether one chooses to accept the virgin conception will depend upon one's theological and philosophical convictions as well as one's faith in the ancient Church's witness to Jesus. All I can say is that in early 2007 it was reported in the news that a female Komodo dragon named Flora conceived through parthenogenesis (i.e. reproduction without the aid of a male). I cannot help but think that if a Komodo dragon can do it, why not God?²³

Miracles

There is perhaps no area of historical research and philosophical enquiry that will separate Evangelicals and Secularists more than the question of miracles. To begin with, what is a miracle? A *miracle* is an extraordinary event that is brought about by a god and possesses religious significance.²⁴ A *miracle story* is a short narrative that includes a miraculous event as the climax of the account. In the Gospels Jesus is reported to have performed 36 independent miracles consisting of exorcisms, healings, resuscitations and nature-miracles.²⁵ But how plausible is a miracle when it comes to history, especially the historical Jesus?

There are several philosophical and scientific objections to miracles. The philosopher David Hume argued that a miracle is a violation of the unalterable laws of nature and miracles are therefore impossible. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann maintained that miracles are part of the mythic husk that the message of the New Testament is contained in and can be disregarded as they are foreign to the world of modern man. Others point out that there were various miracles purported to have been performed

²¹ See further, Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

²² Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 33.

²³ I owe this analogy to Ben Witherington: <<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/01/virginal-conception-and-political.html>> (cited 25 January 2007).

²⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracles* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 1.

²⁵ See the list in B. L. Blackburn, 'Miracles and Miracle Stories', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 549–60 (551).

by persons in the ancient world such as Rabbi Honi the Circle-Drawer and Apollonius of Tyana and we do not believe in such legends about them, so why should we believe in miraculous legends about Jesus? There are several responses that I can make here. Against Hume not everyone is a default atheist and if it is possible that God exists then it is equally possible that this God may actually choose to intervene in the affairs of human beings. Miracles are not necessarily a violation of the laws of nature as much as they are acts where God temporarily overpowers nature. An aeroplane does not violate Newton's law of gravity as much as it is able to nullify its effect with its own power. Bultmann's objection is Eurocentric and peoples of other cultures in Africa, Asia and South America have no a priori problem with miracles. What is more, Bultmann essentially swaps a theistic worldview for a deistic one where God is the absentee landlord who no longer interacts in the world as he is purported to have done in the Gospels. The question of religious parallels is more interesting. Still, one unique facet of Jesus' miracles that sets him apart from other miracle-workers is that he claims to perform these miracles with a sense of unmediated authority and is not simply a medium for some higher power. These signs or mighty deeds performed by Jesus are regarded as the proof that Israel's story is reaching its gripping conclusion through him. These mighty acts of Jesus also have better historical attestation than that for any other miracle-worker in the ancient world, including the likes of Apollonius of Tyana whose miraculous works are extant only in the account of the third-century writer Flavius Philostratus.

There are also several reasons why the miracles of Jesus have historical plausibility. First, the Gospels portray Jesus as performing mighty deeds of healings, miracles and exorcisms which attracted crowds and made him popular. That is eminently plausible, as Morton Smith wrote that 'the gospels represent Jesus as attracting attention primarily as a miracle worker, and winning his followers by miracles. The gospels do so because he did so.'²⁶ That fits into a first-century context where various popular prophets such as the Samaritan (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.85–87), Theudas (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–98; Acts 5.36), the Egyptian (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.169–171; *J.W.* 2.261–263; Acts 21.38) and Jonathan the refugee (Josephus, *Life* 424–425; *J.W.* 7.437–442) all attracted significant crowds by fostering hope in presenting the signs of deliverance. Second, such miracles are attested in every stratum of the Gospel tradition (Mark, material common to Luke and Matthew, material unique to Luke, Matthew and John). Third, Jesus is even

²⁶ Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 10.

reported as being a miracle-worker outside of the Gospels including the Jewish *Tosefta* (*t. Hul.* 2.22–23) and by Josephus (*Ant.* 18.64). The Jewish and pagan authors accuse him of sorcery and magic precisely because of his reputation as a miracle-worker (*b. Sanh.* 43a; Origen, *Cels.* 1.6, 38, 68, 160; Quadratus in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.2; Justin, *Dial.* 68). In the magical papyri incantations were given in Jesus' name which assumes the efficacy of Jesus' name in healings and exorcisms (PGM 4.3019–30; cf. Acts 19.13–19; Arnobius, *Adv. Gent.* 1.43; and use of Jesus' name in healing was prohibited by the later rabbis). Fourth, many of these miracle stories include embarrassing elements that the early Church would be unlikely to invent, such as the claim that Jesus could not perform many miracles in Nazareth because of a lack of faith (Mark 6.4–6) and the admission that Jesus' signs did not convince the inhabitants of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin (Luke 10.13–15/Matt. 11.20–24). What is more, much of the anti-Jesus rhetoric that one finds in the Gospels presupposes that Jesus was doing miraculous deeds. This includes the accusation that Jesus performs miracles by the power of Beelzebub (Mark 3.22–23; Luke 11.19/Matt. 12.27), the sarcastic calls for Jesus to do in his hometown what he did in Capernaum (Luke 4.23), and Herod's mocking of Jesus' miraculous abilities (Luke 23.8–11). Fifth, that Jesus was identified as 'a prophet' by the crowds (Mark 6.15; Matt. 21.11, 46; Luke 7.16, 39; 24.19; John 4.19; 9.17) and 'the prophet' by his followers (Deut. 18.15, 19; and Acts 3.22–23; 7.37; cf. John 6.14; 7.40) was probably spurred on by belief in his miracle-working abilities. This evidence does not prove every single miracle that Jesus performed and it does not indicate that every reported miracle had a supernatural source, but it does show that the miracle stories are part of the most authentic core of the tradition and Jesus was remembered by his followers and known by his contemporaries as being a miracle-worker. John Meier writes:

Viewed globally, the tradition of Jesus' miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity than are a number of other well-known and often readily accepted traditions about his life and ministry . . . Put dramatically but with not too much exaggeration: if the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *in toto* as unhistorical, so should every other Gospel tradition about him.²⁷

In terms of Jesus' ministry these 'signs' (*sēmeia*) or 'mighty deeds' (*dunamis*) had a threefold function: (1) they indicate the presence and

²⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (ABRL; 3 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2.630.

power of the future age operating in Jesus (e.g. Matt. 12.28; Luke 11.20); (2) they testify to Jesus as God's eschatological agent; and (3) they evoke faith by performing the signs that indicate that Israel's restoration is at hand. At the same time, Jesus rejected demands for him to do miraculous signs on cue in order to authenticate his identity (Mark 8.11–13; John 6.30) and he reportedly rebuked the crowds for treating him like a moveable feast because of his feeding miracle (John 6.26). Jesus was opposed to those who became fixated on the signs of the kingdom while ignoring the message of the kingdom to repent and believe in the gospel.

The message of Jesus: the kingdom and the king

Closely related to the miracles of Jesus is the message of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels imply that the central theme of Jesus' message was the kingdom of God (Mark 1.14–15; Matt. 4.23; 9.35; Luke 4.43; 8.1; 9.11). This phrase occurs frequently on the lips of Jesus and in some Jewish writings contemporary with Jesus (e.g. *As. Mos.* 10.1–3; *Wis.* 10.10; *Pss. Sol.* 17.3; 1QM 12.6–10), but there is a paucity of references to it in the Old Testament. More common in the Old Testament is the theme of God as 'king'. In one sense God already is king of Israel (e.g. 1 Sam. 8.7; Ps. 24.8–10; 29.10), but in another sense there was a hope that God would yet show himself as king. For example, in Psalm 145.8–13 the Psalmist praises Yahweh's compassion and love and announces that Yahweh's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and expresses the hope that all nations would praise Israel's God. In Isaiah 52.7, there is the announcement of glad tidings of peace and salvation as the coming reign of Yahweh will spell an end to Israel's exile in Babylon and mark the beginning of the restoration of the Jewish nation from virtual death. In Daniel 7, we encounter this mysterious figure called 'one like a son of man' who is granted an everlasting kingdom. At the end of Obadiah there is the promise that, when Israel's exile is over, the kingdom would become the Lord's. We see that Yahweh's kingdom, kingship and reign are bound up with a certain matrix of political and religious hopes, including a new exodus, the return of the twelve tribes to Palestine, the advent of a messianic figure (or figures) to defeat Israel's enemies and reign in righteousness, a new or purified temple, the establishment of pure worship and a righteous people, the return of Yahweh to Zion, abundant prosperity, a renewed covenant, and the subjugation or admission of the Gentiles. This is what we call eschatology; it is about the future of Israel and the nations. The Jewish view was that Yahweh would not allow Israel to languish in exile or under foreign oppression for ever, but would remember his covenant with Israel, and what God did for Israel would eventually spill over to affect

the gentile nations. When all of this occurred, it would be the day that God finally became king.

Thus, when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, he was not talking about a social programme for society nor was he telling people how to get to heaven. Rather, he was proclaiming that Israel's God was now acting in a dramatic way to make good his promises that had been announced in the prophets; in other words, God was at last becoming king and displaying his kingship through this particular Jewish prophet to achieve the renewal and restoration of Israel. Viewed this way the 'kingdom' is not a timeless metaphor nor a purely political entity, but it is a way of speaking of the dynamic rule or reign of God that is now invading the present. This kingdom cannot be forced (Matt. 11.12/Luke 16.16) but it must be entered (Mark 9.47; 10.15, 23–25; John 3.5). This kingdom is simultaneously present in Jesus' exorcisms, miracles, preaching, and in the experience of the Spirit, and yet it also awaits a future consummation. Jesus calls for faith in God given the appearance of the kingdom and also calls for repentance of sins based on the coming judgment associated with the kingdom's final manifestation.

The parables of Jesus are not (as it is often said) 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings'. Jesus' parables represent a form of subversive speech that strike at the jugular of the beliefs, aspirations and worldviews of his audience by retelling the story of Israel, God, the Messiah and the kingdom in a provocative and arresting way so as to undermine alternative perceptions of Israel's story and identity (as held by the Pharisees, proto-Zealots, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.). That is why many of the parables are spoken by Jesus in contexts of hostility and opposition. Even when the content of the parables appears largely didactic rather than polemical there still remains a tacit element of unexpected reversal in their narrative climax (see the parables of the Prodigal Son [Luke 15.11–32], Day Labourers [Matt. 20.1–16] and Vineyard Tenants [Mark 12.1–12]). The parables bring to light what Jesus means by 'kingdom' and it may not be the same as that of his contemporaries, such as the zealot-minded Judeans or the Herodian collaborators or the ruling priests of the temple. N. T. Wright notes that: 'Jesus was articulating *a new way of understanding the fulfilment of Israel's hope*.'²⁸ Thus Jesus' parables cannot be reduced to quaint vignettes about theology, ethics or social protest (though it may touch upon these), but are related to the larger context of this hope for the deliverance of the Jewish nation. The parables of Jesus are only

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (COQG 2; London: SPCK, 1996), 176 (italics original).

adequately grasped against the larger backdrop of his public ministry as one who comes to effect the restoration of Israel.

In contrast, Crossley thinks that Jesus was wrong about his teachings on the arrival of the kingdom of God in the near future. But this is because of a fundamental misreading of these texts in their literary, political and ideological context. First, in the mind of several Jewish authors the arrival of the kingdom could extend over time, in and through a series of dramatic events that could invade the present (e.g. *Jub.* 23; *1 Enoch* 91.12–17) and so the Habakkuk Commentary at Qumran with its belief in the imminence of the end was not necessarily the default option. Second, sayings about the purported imminence of the coming kingdom can arguably be identified with events other than the end of the physical order. Mark 9.1 is sandwiched in a context where Jesus connects his messianic identity and the kingdom to his appointed destiny to die in Jerusalem amid the messianic woes. Mark 13.30 is part of the discourse of Mark 13 that focuses on the destruction of the temple not the end of the world. The destruction of the temple represents the coming of the Son of Man in judgment and his resultant vindication as the prophet who opposed the temple. Jesus' enigmatic reply to Caiaphas in Mark 14.62 is not about his return from heaven but is a vivid metaphor for his vindication and co-enthronement with God that he is to experience after his sufferings (see Luke and Matthew, who add 'from now on you will see the Son of Man'). Third, the notion of some delay or uncertainty about the coming of the kingdom is ubiquitous throughout the Gospel tradition and, therefore, unlikely to be something that was made up later.²⁹ Moreover, Victoria Balabanski has pointed out that if the early Church was disappointed by the failure of Christ to return, such a disappointment is not uniformly reflected in the key texts. The intensity of hope for Christ's return fluctuated in some contexts and there was no definite tendency towards diminished eschatological enthusiasm since Matthew actually intensifies rather than plays down Mark's eschatological material.³⁰

Jesus' preferred self-designation was 'Son of Man' and this title in the Gospels is central for spelling out Jesus' relation to the coming kingdom. The title 'Son of Man' is one of the most confusing topics in New Testament studies and I am loath to enter into this debate (particularly when I know that Maurice Casey is writing a response against me and he is

²⁹ On the so-called *parousia* sayings, see Timo Laato, *De ignorantia Christi: zur Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien* (Lund: Scriptura, 2002).

³⁰ Victoria Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew and the Didache* (SNTS 97; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

perhaps *the* expert on the subject [see page 33]). Suffice to say, I do believe that the designation was used by Jesus of himself and in a quasi-titular sense. There is a case to be made that in Aramaic the phrase ‘son of man’ can be a generic form of ‘human’ or else it can comprise a manner of self-reference like ‘I’ or ‘someone in my position’ and this fits certain contexts (e.g. Matt. 8.20/Luke 9.58; and Mark 3.27–28), although it has also been debated to what extent this idiomatic usage was current in the first century. What is more, we do know that some Jews were reading Daniel 7.13 about the ‘Son of Man’ messianically. Documents like *4 Ezra* and parts of *1 Enoch*, probably written in the same century in which Jesus lived, clearly make the Son of Man a messianic figure. On the lips of Jesus ‘Son of Man’ is a deliberately veiled and cryptic messianic claim; it speaks of a role more than a title.

That leads to the question, did Jesus think of himself as the Messiah or the king of the coming kingdom? That Jesus was crucified owing to a perceived messianic claim is evident from the question posed to him by the High Priest at his trial (Mark 14.61) and from the titulus ‘King of the Jews’ on the cross (Mark 15.26; John 19.19). Why was this allegation made against Jesus and why was Jesus mocked as a messianic pretender? Crossley never engages this question and he finds the impulse towards Jesus’ messiahship in the post-Easter period. There remain, nevertheless, strong indications that Jesus did make an implicit claim to be the Messiah and that it was determinative for him being handed over to the Romans. In the first place, there is absolutely no reason why Jesus’ resurrection should be said to necessitate his messianic identity since ‘resurrected’ does not equal ‘Messiah’. Against Crossley more specifically, the early Christians did not need the title ‘Messiah’ to portray Jesus as the ‘supreme figure’ who brooks no rivals since the titles ‘Lord’, ‘Prince’ and ‘Son of God’ achieved that far better than did the title ‘Messiah’. Second, elements of Jesus’ pre-passion ministry have messianic overtones. Jesus’ action in preaching a gospel and his work of healings and exorcisms correspond with the messianic vocation as spelled out in the *Messianic Apocalypse* from Qumran: ‘He will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead alive, he will proclaim good news to the poor’ (4Q521 2.12). In fact, in a pericope from Q (Luke 7.18–23/Matt. 11.2–6) Jesus answers an explicit messianic question from followers of John the Baptist with an answer along the lines of 4Q521, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them’ (Luke 7.22/Matt. 11.5). Third, Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem in his final days can be said to have a messianic motif in so far as the triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple and

parabolic utterances like the Parable of the Tenants all point in the direction of a carefully crafted messianic claim. Ben Meyer wrote, ‘the entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple constituted a messianic demonstration, a messianic critique, a messianic fulfilment event, and a sign of the messianic restoration of Israel.’³¹ Jesus may never have explicitly claimed the title ‘Messiah’, given its militaristic associations, but he certainly did act out the role in ways that were provocative and telling.

Another aspect of Jesus’ message for us to consider was his view of the Torah or Jewish Law, out of which Crossley makes a lot. I concur with Crossley that Jesus was essentially Law-observant, but we should also keep in mind that relaxation of certain commands and intensification of other commands was a common feature in Jewish prophetic renewal movements. That is why Jesus prohibits divorce when the Law allows it (Mark 10.1–12) and why he forbids a would-be disciple from burying his father which the Law explicitly commands (Matt. 8.22–23/Luke 9.59–60). I am also much more confident, in sharp contrast to Crossley, that Jesus did see a place for the Gentiles in the kingdom and I have argued elsewhere that Jesus believed that a transformed Israel would transform the world.³² While I do not think that Jesus abrogated the Law, he did, like other Jews, relativize purity beneath morality and refused to make certain interpretations of the food laws the distinctive boundary marker of covenant identity (e.g. Mark 7.1–23).

Did Jesus think that he was God?

The American scholar John Knox wrote: ‘I, for one, simply cannot imagine a sane human being, of any historical period or culture, entertaining the thoughts about himself which the Gospels, as they stand, often attribute to him [Jesus].’³³ On this view, to think that Jesus regarded himself to be in any sense ‘God’ is said to be improbable. After all, there is no reason to see Jesus as anything other than a good monotheist. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, the gospel of God (e.g. Mark 1.14–15); he prays to God as Father (Mark 14.36; Luke 11.1–4/Matt. 6.9–13; John 11.41–42); he affirms the Jewish confession of God, the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6.4 (Mark 12.29–30), and he calls for steadfast devotion to God (Luke 16.13/Matt. 6.24). And yet the Nicene Creed, a fourth-century Christian statement of faith, declares that Christians believe in

³¹ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 199.

³² Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*.

³³ John Knox, *The Death of Christ: The Cross in New Testament History and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), 58.

‘one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God’. Was the deity of Christ something concocted by creative minds such as Paul and John as Christianity spread out into the wider Graeco-Roman world where Christian beliefs became intermingled with pagan beliefs of divinized beings and then popularized by the post-Constantine Church? Or, did Jesus have a consciousness of himself as being divine and called to exercise divine prerogatives? I shall defend the latter.

To begin with, it is necessary to explode the popular caricature of Jesus which presents Jesus as announcing: ‘Hi, I’m God. I’m going to die on the cross for your sins. But first of all I’m going to teach you how to be a good Christian and how to get to heaven. And after that I thought it would be fitting if you all worshipped me as the second member of the Trinity.’ This might seem a rather naïve way to understand Jesus’ identity, but it is a sketch of Jesus that many Bible-believing Christians have. When I argue that Jesus understood himself to be in a sense divine, this is not what I am talking about.

The place to start is with Jesus as the ‘Son’. There are multiply attested units where Jesus refers to himself as the ‘Son’ and so refers to his unique filial relation to God and his special role in ushering in the kingdom (Luke 10.22/Matt. 11.27; Mark 12.1–12; John 3.35–36; 5.19–47; 6.45–46). This is confirmed by Jesus’ own experience of God in baptism (Mark 1.11), during temptation (Matt. 4.1–11/Luke 4.1–13) and revelation (Luke 10.21–22/Matt. 11.25–27). Jesus expressed a sense of unmediated divine authority that led the authorities to query him about its origin (Mark 11.27–33) and public opinion was that he spoke with a *unique* authority that set him apart from the scribes (Mark 1.22, 27; cf. Matt. 8.9/Luke 7.8). Jesus also reconfigures divine commandments based on his own authority (e.g. Matt. 5.21, 27, 33, 38, 43).

Claims to speak for God do not imply divinity as several prophetic figures often claimed to speak for God, but no one regarded them as divine. But in the case of Jesus this authority became unusually acute. Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of sins which leads to a charge of blasphemy (Mark 2.5, 10; cf. Luke 7.36–50). The charge, ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ (Mark 2.7) demonstrates that Jesus appropriated the role of the priest in relation to atonement, but outside of the cultus, and thus with an independent authority and with independent access to God. Here Jesus does not claim to be a rogue priest, but he offers the forgiveness that was only available through the divinely instituted system of sacrifices (cult of Yahweh) at the place of God’s dwelling (temple of Yahweh). While it is true that one can find examples of forgiveness of sins outside of the

cultus (e.g. Ecclus. 3.30, which Crossley mentions, and I would add 4QprNab 242.4 from Qumran), Crossley has not explained the reason for the allegation of blasphemy. If Jesus meant, ‘Your sins have been forgiven by God’ then how would that evoke the response ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’? The ‘God alone’ part is crucial as Jesus was perceived as providing that which only God can provide.

We can add that Jesus’ eschatology implies a Christology. Not only is the kingdom coming but also Jesus is the one who inaugurates it through his mighty deeds, exorcisms, healings, and preaching. In Luke 11.20, Jesus is remembered as saying: ‘But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.’ It is simplistic therefore to say that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and that the Church proclaimed Jesus. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom always carried with it an implied self-reference as he is the agent bringing it into effect. It is response to Jesus’ message that determines one’s standing in the covenant and entrance into the kingdom (Mark 1.15; 8.34—9.1; 12.1–12; Matt. 7.24–27; 21.31; Luke 10.16/Matt. 10.40; John 13.20). Moreover, there are instances where Jesus apparently refers to himself as one who is like Wisdom (Matt. 11.28–30; Luke 7.35/Matt. 11.19; Luke 11.49), is greater than the temple (Matt. 12.6) and greater than Satan (Mark 3.27; Luke 11.21–22/Matt. 12.29). Torah, Wisdom and temple were symbols of God’s presence with his people and were in a sense incarnational, and it is these symbols that Jesus associates with his own vocation and identity.³⁴ Jesus’ use of Psalm 110 in Mark 12.35–37 testifies to his belief that the Messiah is somehow more than a Son of David and destined for an enthronement on par with Daniel 7.13–14 (see also *1 Enoch* 55.4; 62.3–5). In Luke 19.44, Jesus is remembered as saying: ‘and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’ The background to this saying is probably Ezekiel 34, which depicts the coming of God in the coming of the Davidic Shepherd-King. Wright is correct when he posits Jesus as entering Jerusalem believing that he is embodying the return of God to Zion and offering divine salvation to the populace of Jerusalem.³⁵

Crossley brazenly dismisses the authenticity of the ‘Johannine Thunderbolt’ in Matthew 11.27/Luke 10.22 (see page 15) on the grounds that this is a ‘Christianized formulation’. Yet we have here a saying attributed to Jesus

³⁴ On the pre-existence of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, see Simon Gathercole, *The Pre-Existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

³⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 631–53.

that clearly elevates his status and role in the divine design and it comes from a source (probably 'Q') that is quite early. I suspect that the real reason why Crossley brushes it aside so quickly is because it might show that John's Christology is not quite as foreign to the historical Jesus as he thinks.

In early Christianity there arose rather quickly the integration of Jesus into patterns of worship. Religious devotion became largely binitarian,³⁶ centred on Jesus and God, and Jesus was accordingly regarded as participating in the divine identity, which goes back as early as the Aramaic-speaking Church; for example, in 1 Corinthians 16.22 the Aramaic word *marā* or 'Lord' (e.g. *maranatha*) is used of Jesus. When the early Christians mentioned God they had to mention Jesus as well, and whenever they mentioned Jesus they felt constrained to mention God in the same breath.³⁷ It is important to realize that although Christianity was still within the domain of monotheism it has developed into *messianic monotheism*, where the very meaning of 'God' is redefined in view of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus (John 1.1–14; Rom. 9.5; 1 Cor. 8.6; 16.22; Phil. 2.5–11; Col. 1.15–20). Yet this has pre-Easter antecedents since Jesus' claim to authority, his claim to act and speak on behalf of God, his mission to embody the presence of God in Jerusalem is the presupposition for the binitarian Christ-devotion of the primitive Church. Jesus afforded himself a role in the divine design that was unprecedented and blurred the line between author and agent. Jesus is a prophet, and *more* than a prophet, and it is this 'more' that prompted deeper reflection in light of his resurrection and exaltation as to how Jesus related to the identity and personification of God. The worship patterns of the primitive Church did not occur *ex nihilo*, belief in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus would not be sufficient of itself to effect the belief that Jesus had been co-enthroned with God and incorporated into the divine identity. Rather, the seed bed upon which this faith in Jesus grew was out of Jesus' belief that he was the divine agent *par excellence*. As Craig Evans states: 'The New Testament deification of Jesus Christ, as seen especially in the theologies of Paul and the fourth evangelist, has its roots in the words and activities of the historical Jesus.'³⁸

³⁶ Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

³⁷ Marinus de Jonge, *God's Final Envoy: Early Christology and Jesus' Own View of His Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 130.

³⁸ Craig A. Evans, 'The Historical Jesus and the Deified Christ: How Did the One Lead to the Other?' in *The Nature of Religious Language: A Colloquium*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 47–67 (67). I recommend also Raymond E. Brown, 'Did Jesus Know He was God?' *BTB* 15 (1985), 74–9.

Conclusions

So what is historical about the historical Jesus? In brief, I have argued that several things were, including doubts over Jesus' paternity, which are consistent with Christian claims of a virgin conception; he was widely known to have performed mighty deeds, healings, exorcisms; he spoke of the kingdom of God as the dynamic reign of God that was breaking in; he referred to himself as the 'Son of Man,' which cryptically designated his unique authority and messianic role; Jesus had a high view of his own person and destiny as being bound up with the identity and mission of God; and his chief aim was to effect the restoration and regathering of Israel in a new exodus. Thus, the answer that I find myself drawn to by the phenomenon that is early Christianity is that Jesus was a miracle-worker, a prophet, a rabbi, a martyr, the Messiah and Lord.

This approach can be contrasted with Crossley in at least three ways.

- 1 Crossley is a materialist in that this world is all that there is and there is no possibility of a god intervening to establish his purposes for the human race. I do not share that assumption (which is what it is). Unless I become convinced that the universe just popped into existence by itself with no thought of a personal creative agent, and that human beings just happened to have evolved from amino acids into astronauts at random, I see no reason to adopt his materialist worldview.
- 2 Crossley plays the sociology hand very well but also very hard. Undoubtedly urbanization and the economic climate of Palestine shaped the contours of Jesus' message and how it was received. When Jesus said, 'blessed are the poor,' he meant those of low status, economically and socially, not the affluently rich but spiritually poor. Yet we must not mistake *context* for *content*. The social environment of Jesus' ministry does not 'explain' the emergence of Jesus' ministry as much as it situates Jesus' teachings in a broader socio-economic context. Crossley is right to resist constructions of the historical Jesus that are little more than a cluster of theological ideas, but sometimes theological ideas matter hugely to the most economically deprived of people. It is a matter of getting the balance between sociology, economics and theology right, and I am not convinced that Crossley is there just yet.
- 3 Crossley is very dependent on cross-cultural comparisons for his conclusions. That is legitimate enough (I myself cite many non-Christian sources to make my point); methodologically, however, it can easily degenerate into parallel-o-mania where exhibit 'A' is little more than another version of exhibit 'B'. What is more, as I shall often say, analogy does not prove genealogy, and the formative causes for things Jesus

said and did cannot be explained away by comparative studies. People do and say things for religious reasons and those reasons cannot be reduced to sociological factors in a theological garb.

Response from James G. Crossley

Unfortunately space demands that I cannot respond to all of Bird's points. In passing, I am not convinced Bird has fully appreciated socio-historical methodology. Bird's discussion of the use of parallels (see pages 32–3) does not deal with the approach I advocate, though this may not be significant if Bird does not have my arguments in mind. As I have openly and polemically opposed the approaches Bird also critiques, and as every parallel I used is purposely backed up with evidence from Jesus' immediate context, there is no need to debate this further. In the abstract, we would actually seem to agree more than Bird seems to suggest.

Law and kingdom

On the Law, Bird refers to 'Jewish prophetic renewal movements' (see page 28) intensifying and relaxing commandments (from whose perspective – ours?) but I am not sure what he is talking about here. On relaxation and intensification (whatever he may mean by this) and the divorce passage mentioned (Mark 10.2–12) it is worth pointing out that similar Jewish views have been shown to exist by both myself and, more importantly, David Instone-Brewer.³⁹ On the saying, 'let the dead bury their dead' (Matt. 8.22–23/Luke 9.59–60), Bird references an old view on this being a 'relaxation' (see page 28). But there is nothing of the sort mentioned in the text and there is no acknowledgement of contemporary Jewish discussions which contradict Bird's statement.⁴⁰ Contrary to Bird's confidence, there is not a commandment referenced in this verse. There is not even the remotest sign of this saying being controversial in the Gospel contexts (compare Sabbath and purity disputes). Besides, the man's father is not going to be left unburied (the usual source of the scholarly view of controversy) because, as the passage says quite unambiguously, the dead man will be buried.

³⁹ D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002); Crossley, *Date of Mark's Gospel*, chapter 6.

⁴⁰ See M. Bockmuehl, 'Let the Dead Bury Their Dead (Matt. 8:22/Luke 9:60): Jesus and the Halakah', *JTS* 49 (1998), 553–81; C. H. T. Fletcher-Louis, '“Leave the Dead to Bury Their Own Dead”: Q 9.60 and the Redefinition of the People of God', *JSNT* 26 (2003), 39–68.

In Bird's discussion of the kingdom of God (see pages 24–6), the parallel texts which claim to spread the kingdom over time do precisely what texts such as Mark 9.1 do *not* do. Bird tries to wriggle out of the problematic situation by vaguely claiming that Mark 9.1 'is sandwiched in a context where Jesus connects his messianic identity and the kingdom to his appointed destiny to die in Jerusalem amid the messianic woes.' So what? Jesus still predicts the imminent coming of *the kingdom* in the middle of this.

Historicity and miracles

With other ancient texts in mind, statistically speaking we might reasonably expect *at least* a few Gospel verses to be inventions. This is a real problem for some evangelical approaches that claim every word of the Gospels is fact because it seems to compromise conventional historical practice, assuming that is what evangelicals want to be part of. In practice there are many examples from Bird's chapter that ought to be regarded as secondary, most obviously in his discussions of the miraculous, an issue to which I will return shortly. His discussion of the virgin birth (see pages 18–21) makes some dubious assumptions in terms of historical reconstruction. Bird does not back up his suggestion that Jesus' birth was enigmatic from the start. Jesus being 'born of a woman' (Gal. 4.4) is meaningless in terms of the virgin birth because I, like many others, was born that way too. Being called 'son of Mary' (Mark 6.3) can be explained in other ways (e.g. Joseph was long dead, a deliberately provocative allegation). Insinuations about Jesus' origins (e.g. John 8.41) are later than the birth narratives (Bird cites no early evidence) and so the assumption that Jesus had an unusual birth would have been present by this time and potentially up for debate. All of this merely shows, at best, that Jesus' birth was enigmatic from the earliest tradition available to Matthew and Luke. We have no idea how enigmatic his birth was during his life and in the first couple of decades following his death. Yet still the big problem will not go away: why is the virgin birth not in the earliest Gospel, Mark's Gospel?

On the historicity of miracles (see pages 21–4), Bird can cite as many multiple miracle traditions as he wants but they do not show Jesus really did perform supernatural miracles. All this shows is that some people *believed* Jesus performed supernatural miracles from an early date. On the issue of embarrassment (see page 23), Bird claims that the early Church would not have invented Jesus' inability to perform 'many miracles' in Nazareth because of a lack of faith (Mark 6.4–6). But we must be clear here: Mark 6.5–6 does not mention *miracles* that must be *supernatural*. The passage says, 'And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands

on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.' This can easily be explained in terms of non-supernatural cross-cultural healing of the sort we might associate with faith healers or shamans found throughout history right up to the present (see Casey's response, pages 183–94). There is clearly a problem in lumping miracles and healings/exorcisms together. Again, Jesus is *not*, as Bird claims, accused of performing *miracles* by the power of Beelzebub (Mark 3.22–23; Luke 11.19/Matt. 12.27). The problem is unambiguously with Jesus' *exorcisms* as the Gospels make perfectly clear (Mark 3.22–23; Matt. 12.27/Luke 11.19) and echoed in similar cross-cultural phenomena.

Christology and self-understanding

Bird's handling of the 'son of man' debate is problematic for the following reasons: he has not noticed an example of the generic 'son of man' several centuries prior to the second century CE (Sefire III, lines 14–17, not to mention Mark 2.27–28 being a particularly clear Gospel example); he does not properly engage with the basic idea that 'son of man' is a common and ordinary Semitic term for 'human being'; the Jewish texts he cites explicitly mention Daniel 7.13 so it is obvious that Daniel 7.13 is in mind in these Jewish texts; several Gospel texts do not reference Daniel 7.13 or anything vaguely 'messianic', etc. so it is difficult to see how anything other than a basic Semitic idiom is being used here; texts such as *1 Enoch*, with the best versions of the key sections remaining in Ethiopic, do not necessarily speak of the 'son of man' in relation to 'the Messiah' in the strong sense and still retain the ordinary use of the term as 'human being'. Where Bird gets the language of 'cryptic' and 'veiled' from, I have no idea, but it cannot be the Gospel texts or the basic Semitic idiom.

Bird wants to defend the view that Jesus had 'a consciousness of himself as being divine and called to exercise divine prerogatives' (see page 29). But the only evidence for 'Son' to be taken in its strongest sense is either late or obviously secondary. Bird refers to 'multiply attested units' in support (see page 29). Three of these five are from John's Gospel (John 3.35–36; 5.19–47; 6.45–46) and include staggeringly high claims (e.g. making Jesus equal with God) that are simply *not* found in the Synoptic Gospels. If such spectacular things had been said in Jesus' lifetime, why were they left out of earlier tradition?

There is one, *and only one*, example given from material particular to Luke and Matthew (Luke 10.22/Matt. 11.27) that comes anywhere near close. Bird makes some strange deductions in trying to work out my reasons for rejecting its historical accuracy when they were merely based on conventional historical method. For a start, Luke 10.22/Matt. 11.27 would

restrict Jesus' message to Palestinian Jews and exclude Diaspora Jews, something that is not echoed anywhere else in the Jesus traditions. As an important aside, this saying only has the Son revealing the Father and there is nothing like the conflict over Jesus making himself God, such as we find in John's Gospel. That is a significant difference, even if both are not historically accurate, because Bird's language of 'Johannine thunderbolt' is overdone.

What this latter point also supports is the well-established scholarly observation that the title 'Son' visibly develops in the Gospel tradition. This is in fact further supported by the reference Bird makes to the earliest source, Mark (12.1–12). In Mark 12.1–12, the language is vague and parabolic, making no claims whatsoever to Jesus' divinity in any strong, or indeed weak, sense. The fact that Bird cannot provide significant early evidence of Jesus as Jesus-as-Son in a strong sense is telling because if Jesus really did say something as dramatic as Bird thinks he did why does it not occur anywhere else in Matthew, Mark or Luke?

Further evidence used to defend this 'divine' Jesus is the scholarly construct of Jesus and an alternative priestly system. The blasphemy charge over 'forgiveness' of sins (Mark 2.7) apparently 'demonstrates that Jesus appropriated the role of the priest in relation to atonement, but outside of the cultus . . . he offers the forgiveness that was only available through the divinely instituted system of sacrifices (cult of Yahweh) at the place of God's dwelling (temple of Yahweh)' (see page 29). Is there not a problem here with the fact that Jesus is never explicitly said to be acting as an alternative priest in the synoptic tradition and only ever endorses the ideal function of the temple system (Mark 1.44; Matt. 5.23–24; 23.16–22)? Bird also needs to answer this: if the healed man had to go to the Temple, which sins would be forgiven according to Jewish law and how would the priest go about forgiving the sins?

If we assume for a moment that historically there was a conflict over blasphemy underlying Mark 2.1–12, and if we note the idea that sins could be forgiven outside the Temple,⁴¹ the conflict could alternatively be explained as concerning the authority to perform healings and exorcisms. This is precisely the conflict over blasphemy in Mark 3. But we should not assume that there really was a conflict because the scribes *think* Jesus did

⁴¹ Bird suggests adding 4QprNab 242.4 from Qumran as an example (see page 30). I am not so sure. This Aramaic passage can be translated in a number of ways for a start. It was also collected among the Dead Sea Scrolls, by a group of people who did have some kind of alternative temple, so it is possible that it is not representative of people assuming the validity of the Jerusalem Temple.

something deemed blasphemous. Note: *think*. Jesus' opponents do not actually say anything. Mark tells us that they were angry inside, something which should strongly imply that this part of the story was an invention by Mark (how could the writer possibly have known what they were thinking?).

Bird claims that the 'worship patterns of the primitive Church did not occur *ex nihilo*, belief in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus would not be sufficient of itself to effect the belief that Jesus had been co-enthroned with God and incorporated into the divine identity' (see page 31). An obvious response would be, *why not?* Why *should* the seeds of Jesus' deification have to be in his teaching? Not all believers thought of Jesus in such elevated terms. *Why not?* Given that Bird makes the assumption that claims of worship emerged from one person, Jesus, is it not theoretically possible for an alternative solution, namely, that *another* person (or persons) and their ideas were responsible for the worship of Jesus? We might add that there could be any number of social, theological, historical, economic, etc. reasons why the deification of Jesus could take place after his death and potentially run clean contrary to what Jesus believed about himself. And, if there is one thing we know about human beings, it is that they are more than capable of making things up.

Further reading

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