

The Trouble with Jesus

Towards an understanding of the origins of the New Testament's hero

Introduction (*Extracts*)

The hypothesis underlying this book is that the Jesus of the New Testament is primarily a literary and theological creation. He began life in the minds of men as a divine archangel, predicted by the prophet Zechariah in the 6th century BCE as the Saviour of Israel, later reinterpreted in the 1st century CE by Philo and other Jewish savants, among whom must be numbered the author of the main Pauline epistles and whoever wrote the Fourth Gospel. As such Jesus was another emanation of the supreme deity, like the Hagia Sophia (the Holy Wisdom) the Logos (The Word) and the Pneuma (the Holy Breath/Spirit). The special quality of the divine Jesus was that he was a Saviour figure: Jesus means 'Yahweh saves' or simply 'salvation', and Jesus, Joshua and Yehoshua are all renderings of the same name. In the centuries on either side of the turn of the era, there were theological movements across many cultures involving the search for more accessible and approachable divinities, figures who could intercede between the remote Godhead and mere mortals. In short, the novel idea of a personal Saviour-God was in the air...

It was probably towards the end of the 1st century CE or in the early part of the 2nd that the story of Jesus was first told in the form of a Gospel (Good News). It was a moral tale dealing with cosmic and universal truths; hence the narrative was symbolic not historical. It was read *by* the learned, who understood the hidden meanings, but read *to* the unsophisticated, who did not. Thus, almost by accident, Jesus the divine spirit became envisioned as an historical person, born of a woman, who walked the face of the earth, suffered unjustly and who met a shameful death. This misreading of what must be regarded as a literary experiment became a runaway success. The story spoke powerfully to the downtrodden and was plagiarized and embellished by other writers. The result was that, within a century of its conception, it had, through its various progeny, spread widely in the Mediterranean world. The great utility of this popular myth was soon noticed by the educated too, by those who had from the first grasped the essential esoteric foundation of the story. Within the emerging power structures of the faith, which they controlled, realization soon dawned that it would be expedient for the Jesus of the Gospel to stand as an authority

figure within history, passing his powers only to chosen followers and their successors. This Christ figure would give them the power to exclude individualists and interlopers, and affirm true doctrine amidst the sea of conflicting theologies in 2nd century Christianity. We now know a successor of this formative document as *The Gospel According to Mark*, an experiment in the transformation of the staple hero biography, widely known in the classical world, and now adapted to Jewish tradition...

I take it that the anonymous author of *The Gospel According to Mark* created a Gospel-length parable on the tribulations of Israel (just as in Hebrew scripture, *Job* had been a book-length parable on the same subject) personified in the figure of Jesus, 'The Saviour', a vehicle for the expression of the wisdom of God. If Mark drew on oral tradition, it was not derived from 'Jesus of Nazareth', who is unknown to history, but from real historical figures of the tumultuous 1st century CE in Judea : Jesus ben Ananias, Judas of Galilee, Carrabas of Alexandria, Simon bar Giora, John of Giscala, 'Theudas', 'The Egyptian', James 'The Just', among other messianic figures, some of whose names have been lost. His other sources would appear to be, not historical but theological: the 'Suffering Servant' passages in Isaiah 52-53 and a cluster of Psalms centering on No. 22...

The figure of Jesus is thus portrayed as the perfect Jew *and* as the personification of Israel during her tribulations. Mark's Gospel shows that, though the *coup de grace* for Jesus/Israel was inflicted by the Romans in the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE, it was the bad faith and worse behaviour of the Jews, personified as Scribes, Pharisees, 'lawyers' Zealots, Sadducees, Herodians etc, which contrived this fate...

I have come to the conclusion therefore that, whatever the identity of the religious genius who wrote *The Gospel According to Mark*, he was a kind of pious Dr Frankenstein. His patient assembly of the limbs and organs of his metaphorical man Jesus (The Saviour) would teach and show by the example of his righteous life and his patient forbearance of an unjust death how - at last - the Jews might live in harmony within the Roman Empire, bidding a final farewell to the hopeless fantasy of Messiah-led Jewish independence...

Glossary

Apostolic succession: The doctrine that the authority of Christ was vested in the disciple Peter and passed down in an unbroken succession through the bishops of Rome.

Diaspora: The dispersion of the Jewish people around the Mediterranean World. It has been estimated that in New Testament times, at least twice as many Jews lived in the Diaspora as in the Jewish homeland.

Exegesis: Interpretation of scripture.

Gentiles: Non-Jews.

Hellenism/ Hellenistic: Pertaining to the cultural and political amalgam arising from Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian empire in the 4th century BCE, passed down through his generals and their successors and deemed to have ended with the ascendancy of Rome in the Eastern Mediterranean in 31 BCE.

Interpolation: Inserting new material into a document.

Messiah (Christ in Greek). A future saviour of the kingdom of Judah promised in the scriptures. A purely human figure and a descendent of the House of David, he would rid the kingdom of its enemies and institute just rule under God's Law.

Nazoreans: 1st century conservative Jewish sect whose name derived from the verb 'to keep', i.e. Keepers of the Law.

Redaction: The process of re-casting or re-presenting a document. Also known as overwriting.

Septuagint: A ground-breaking but flawed translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, ordered by Ptolemy II of Egypt in the 3rd century BCE.

Syncretism: The amalgamation of religions or cultures.

Zealots: Anti-Roman and religiously motivated Jewish nationalists

Dramatis personae

Caiaphas: Jewish High Priest 18-36CE
Constantine: Roman emperor 306-337CE
Eusebius: Bishop of Caesarea (Palestine) ; Constantine's right hand man
Herod Antipas: Tetrarch of Galilee 4BCE - 39CE
Irenaeus: Bishop of Lyons and writer fl. 180s CE
Jesus ben Ananias: Jewish prophet mentioned by Josephus d.70CE
Josephus: Jewish author of *Jewish War* and *Antiquities*, 37 - c. 100CE
Judas of Galilee: Messianic leader against Romans, active 6 - 21CE
Maximinus Daia: Roman emperor, persecutor of Christianity 305-313CE
Nero: Roman emperor, alleged persecutor of Christians 54-68CE
Origen: Christian writer, fl. early 3rd century
Philo: Jewish Philosopher and prolific author 25BCE - 50CE
Pliny the Younger: Roman politician, fl. early 2nd century.
Pontius Pilate: Prefect of Judea from 26-36 *or* 18-36CE
Tacitus: Roman politician and historian, fl. early 2nd century
Tiberius: Roman emperor at the time of the crucifixion 14-37CE
Tertullian: Christian writer fl. early 3rd century

Reading List

Carrier, Richard - *On the Historicity of Jesus* (2014)
Crossan, John Dominic - *The Power of Parable* (2012)
Doherty, Earl - *The Jesus Puzzle* (2000)
Erman, Bart D - *Misquoting Jesus* (2005)
Erman, Bart D - *Forged* (2011)
Helms, Randel - *Gospel Fictions* (1988)
Moss, Candida - *The Myth of Persecution* (2013)
Price, Robert M - *Deconstructing Jesus* (2000)
Price, Robert M - *The Amazing Colossal Apostle* (2012)