

EVANGELISATION AND SALVATION 2

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2. The historical Jesus and his destiny

Welcome

Welcome once more. With this presentation, we begin the work of *construction*, that is, a first step in re-imagining salvation today. The only possible foundation is the Bible and, in particular, the Gospels. What we are doing is of its nature a delicate task. How much is at stake is signalled by three scholars spanning the twentieth century.

Albert Schweitzer

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands.

And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Raymond Brown

The Colossians hymn professes that Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God—God's Son in whom all things were created, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom all things were reconciled to God.

How within fifty years (at the latest) did Christians come to believe that about a Galilean preacher who was crucified as a criminal?

Joseph Ratzinger

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

With these citations in mind and aware of the mystery of it all, we will try to keep in view the significance and delicacy of what is being attempted.

Sequence

1. The Jesus of history
2. Destiny of Jesus
3. Synthesis
4. Conversation

The Jesus of history

Our major resource of the historical figure of Jesus is the Synoptic Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke. They preserve the narrative, the teaching, the events. It is certain that they all write in the light of the resurrection and that they all represent interpretations in that light. However, these three Gospels are our major source of information about the historical Jesus.

The Fourth Gospel is in a different category. Not for nothing is its symbol the eagle. Biblical scholars and theologians rely on the Fourth Gospel for some historical information not found elsewhere. For instance, it is as good as certain that the ministry of Jesus lasted up to three years, as in the Gospel of John. It seems Mark telescoped everything into a one-year presentation for didactic purposes. It is also practically certain that the Fourth Gospel is correct when it tells us that the death of Jesus took place on the eve of Passover on the Friday night, unlike the Synoptics who tell us that the Passover was on the Thursday night. Also, the writer knows the geography of Jerusalem quite well with details such as a Sheep Pool and so forth.

Nevertheless, as a guide to the historical Jesus, the Fourth Gospel should be placed in a special category. Putting it mildly, the light of the resurrection is so strong in this Gospel that the shadows of humanity become invisible. In particular, throughout the Jesus of John's Gospel knows exactly who he is and what his destiny should be. We are dealing here with the 20:20 vision of retrospective theology from the end of the first century.

One final comment. The Synoptic Gospels do not really offer a worked out theology of salvation. This is because they deal in narrative not in conceptual thought. Of course they do not lack a position on the death of Jesus but it is not developed conceptually. This is in contrast with three other sources in the New Testament.

In my opinion, three writers offer something quite special: Paul, the writer(s) of the Fourth Gospel and the author of Hebrews. These documents really do deal in conceptual theology and offer what we may call a theology of the death of Jesus. This is even true of the Fourth Gospel. Like the other Gospels, it is a narrative. However, the narrative is greatly enriched by discourses and blocks of theological writing which allow us to rank this document with the letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews.

Finally, we remind ourselves of some characteristics of the Synoptic Gospels. There is a significant time gap between the events recounted and the writing of the first Gospel. Most writers say about forty years—at the time equivalent to a generation. Luke is much, much later, around the year AD 115. Matthew is somewhere in between, with a conventional date of about 85 being usually offered. Jesus' language was Aramaic, so at an immediate level there is a change of language at least and we may add a change of culture. All the Gospels were written outside of the Holy Land, in the wider Roman Empire. In the course of time, other interests and concerns emerged in emerging Christianity. So the documents we have reflect not only these later contexts and interests but also the developing religious understanding of the Christ event. To use a metaphor, each Gospel has its own DNA. Although they all tell basically the same story—with considerable overlap between Mark and Matthew—nevertheless, the point of view is different in each case and so is the religious outlook of each writer.

If I were to use a metaphor, perhaps that of a prism might serve. The white light of the Christ event is available to us only as refracted through the colours of each of the Gospels.



In order to deal with this situation, scholarship has developed a series of methods to take us behind the Gospel presentations to recover the Jesus of history. I'm going to mention these briefly. For a fuller review, there is a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). All the contemporary methods are fairly presented and reviewed. At the start of the review of the historical-critical methods, the document says this:

The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the "word of God in human language," has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it.

In scholarship, there are diachronic methods, which work largely in a historical frame, and synchronic methods, which work on the final form of the text.

Diachronic methods

1. A collection of methods
 - a. Textual criticism
 - b. Source criticism
 - c. Historical criticism
 - d. Form criticism
 - e. Redaction Criticism
2. Redaction criticism bridges diachronic and synchronic methods

To assess the historicity of events and sayings in the Gospels, a series of criteria has been developed. The list here is based on the work of John P. Meier, the author of the multi-volume work, *A Marginal Jew*.

Historical Criticism criteria:

1. Embarrassment
2. Discontinuity
3. Multiple attestation
4. Coherence
5. Jesus' rejection and execution

I will be using these criteria here. To complete the picture, here is a sketch of the available synchronic methods:

1. (Redaction criticism)
2. Rhetorical criticism
3. Structural criticism
4. Narrative criticism
5. Various "liberationist" criticisms
6. Canon criticism

Because redaction or editorial criticism deals with the final form of the text, it serves as a bridge between the diachronic and synchronic methods. With all of that so briefly said, we can move on to the Jesus of history and his destiny.

The destiny of Jesus

Our focus in this part is the historical Jesus' understanding of his role and destiny. What is reconstructed here will be taken up again in the next three presentations on Paul, John and Hebrews.

The analysis is confined to the Synoptic Gospels. They tell the story of Jesus from the perspective of the resurrection. They are doing "narrative theology" rather than history. It follows that what can be gleaned will be somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, it is, I think, sufficient to construct Jesus' own understanding of his death.

I begin with general observations, which require only a little comment.

1. Galilean Jewish peasant
2. Apocalyptic believer
3. Follower of John the Baptist
4. Baptised by John
5. Prophet of the kingdom in his own right
6. Proclaimed the kingdom of God
7. Taught the kingdom in parables
8. Performed wonderful deeds to illustrate the kingdom

The one to pause on is no. 2, apocalyptic. Every religions and even philosophy has to deal with the question of evil. How can we still believe in the goodness and omnipotence of God in the face of evil? In the first century AD, many Jews, including Paul and Jesus, were imbued with the outlook of apocalypticism. To us this is both foreign and familiar. It is familiar: it does deal with the universal question of suffering and the goodness of God. It is foreign: it uses a symbol system and literary form, which are strange and at times disturbing to us. When you break through apocalypticism, it is claiming something like this:

The suffering we now undergo is part of the general reality of evil.

Even though we cannot see it now, God will in the future establish his rule (kingdom)

We believe this, even though we cannot see it now, because God is faithful.

Because we cannot see it now, we are called to steadfastness, i.e. faithful endurance.

Continuing our recollection of features of Jesus' life:

1. Had disciples, both women and men
2. Reached out to those on the margins
3. Broke the dietary laws and the purity regulations
4. Practiced open table-fellowship
5. Broke the Sabbath
6. Had a three-year ministry

The ones to pause on here must be nos. 2, 3 and 4. Here we as Christians may miss what is at stake. The purity regulations were not just fussy religious rules but rather building blocks of the identity of Judaism from the time of the great Exile in Babylon. Tinkering with them was tantamount to dismantling identify marks which had stood the test of time. It was therefore dangerous and was resisted. We can feel some sympathy with the flustered synagogue leader in Luke who says not unreasonably:

“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” (Luke 13:14)

In our sketch we may note the following about Jesus.

1. A dissident figure
2. Had conflicts with the authorities
3. Entered Jerusalem on a donkey
4. The Temple Action
5. Hosted a last supper
6. Was arrested and crucified

We pause on the first one. Jesus was a dissident in the way John the Baptist was. Like the people in Qumran, John and Jesus were aware of the corruption of the Temple and both had withdrawn to the desert, a place of penance and purification. Jesus did not stay in the desert, but the attitude is consistent with the Temple Action.

Finally in summary we may say

1. Believed in the kingdom of God
2. Believed in God as father (Abba)
3. Believed he had a special role (Mt 11:25-27)
4. Believed in the resurrection
5. Sought the will of God (Gethsemane)
6. “O God, it is you” may have been his last words

With this much background sketched, we can now focus on the destiny of Jesus in particular. In this constructive exercise, we will use four building blocks:

Using the Historical Critical Method

1. Kingdom in words and deeds
2. Prophet / Son of Man
3. Messiah / Son of David
4. Prayer

1. Kingdom in words and deeds

1. Jesus was an apocalyptic Jew
2. Kingdom = future faithfulness of God, incl. resurrection
 - a. Future kingdom
 - b. Present kingdom
 - c. Kingdom and his destiny
3. A dissident, as a follower of the Baptist
4. Offered in words (parables) and deeds (of many different kinds)

We pause on no. 2. John the Baptist preached the future kingdom of God, actually in a rather ferocious manner. Jesus did not follow him in the ferocity—it is replaced by compassion—but did follow him in proclamation of a future kingdom, when God would make his rule apparent to all. As the ministry developed, it became obvious that the kingdom was actually present in the deeds and words of Jesus himself. Finally, towards the end of his life, he came to see that the kingdom would come actually through his destiny. We can see this in the following passages from Scripture.

Words

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20–21)

And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. (Mark 3:26)

Deeds

Practices: Sabbath, purity laws, dietary laws, the excluded

Controversies: Pharisees, Sadducees, priests

Events: The Twelve, the entry into Jerusalem, the Temple Action

2. Prophet/Son of Man

The historical Jesus certainly understood both his role and destiny in the light of the roles and destinies of the prophets of old.

1. Then Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honour except in his hometown, and among his relatives, and in his own house.” (Mark 6:4)
2. They said, “John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.” (Mark 8:28)
3. Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43–45)
4. But if we say, ‘From people—’” (they feared the crowd, for they all considered John to be truly a prophet). (Mark 11:32)
5. Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, because it is impossible that a prophet should be killed outside Jerusalem.’ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it! (Luke 13:33–34)
6. Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.” (Luke 18:31)

One parable in Mark is especially revealing:

Mark 12:1 Then he began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a pit for its winepress, and built a watchtower. Then he

leased it to tenant farmers and went on a journey. 2 At harvest time he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his portion of the crop. 3 But those tenants seized his slave, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. 4 So he sent another slave to them again. This one they struck on the head and treated outrageously. 5 He sent another, and that one they killed. This happened to many others, some of whom were beaten, others killed. 6 He had one left, his one dear son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours!' 8 So they seized him, killed him, and threw his body out of the vineyard. 9 What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not read this scripture:

'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

11 This is from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes?'" 12 Now they wanted to arrest him (but they feared the crowd), because they realised that he told this parable against them. So they left him and went away.

It is clear that the parable has undergone a theological evolution in light of the Resurrection and OT passage such as Psalm 118. Even when you strip these away, the parable remains one in which Jesus "reads" his destiny as continuous with the sending of the prophets in the OT.

3. *Messiah / Son of David*

The categories of anointed-Messiah and Son of David belong together. They symbolise God's fidelity in the past and into the future. Thus, in our texts, they form part of the project of the apocalyptic kingdom of God.

1. "Messiah" in the Old Testament
2. "Messiah" in the intertestamental books
3. Came to serve (Mk 10:45)
4. Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27-30)
5. Passion Predictions (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33)

The three passion predictions are of particular interest. Although they have been clarified retrospectively (*vaticinium ex eventu*), nevertheless, they capture the awareness of Jesus that his words and his deeds would lead, in prophetic manner, to his death.

A few passages will illustrate:

When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many scolded him to get him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47-48)

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:10)

David himself, by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet."' If David himself calls

him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” And the large crowd was listening to him with delight. (Mark 12:36–37)

Again the high priest questioned him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus, “and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.” (Mark 14:61–62)

4. Prayer

Jesus’ understanding of his death is integrated into his prayer, as we can see in these passages.

The Johannine “bolt of lightning” (Mt 11:25-27; Lk 10:21-22; cf. Gethsemane)

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son decides to reveal him. (Matthew 11:25–27)

While they were eating, he took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take it. This is my body.” And after taking the cup and giving thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many. **I tell you the truth, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.**” After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mark 14:22–26)

The verses in bold are especially significant: they indicate that Jesus connected his destiny with the coming of the kingdom. This is what I meant when I said earlier: *As the ministry developed, it became obvious that the kingdom was actually present in the deeds and words of Jesus himself. Finally, towards the end of his life, he came to see that the kingdom would come actually through his destiny.* Finally, Gethsemane and Calvary help us appreciate that Jesus came to accept his destiny through prayer and ultimately through trust and faith in God.

Going a little farther, he threw himself to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour would pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:35–36)

Now when it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. Around three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah!” Then someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Leave him alone! Let’s see if Elijah will come to take him down!” But Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Mark 15:33–37)

A brief comment on the last words of Jesus. These are great bearers of meaning in all four Gospels. It is clear that the final words in John and Luke reflect closely the theology of those two writers and in that sense these words are not historical. This raises the question of the historicity of the final words in both Mark and Matthew: do these also reflect the theology of the writers? There is a hypothesis, supported by Léon-Dufour and Brown, that the last words of Jesus were a quotation from a Psalm of lament, from the turning point in such a psalm. In the psalms of lament, the person at prayer turns from lament to trust with the words, “my God, you.” This expression is found in Psa. 22:11, 63:2; 118:28; 140:7

Psa. 22:11 ^עלֵי אֱלֹהִים הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי
אֱלֹהֵי אָתָּה

Psa. 22:11
אֱלֹהֵי אָתָּה

Psa. 22:10 Pss 63:2; 118:28; 140:7;
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me
you my God.

He said: Eliatta = Eli atta = My God, it is you!
They heard: Eliatta = Elia tha = Elijah, come!

Mark 15:33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “**Eloi, Eloi**, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 35 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for **Elijah**.” 36 And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether **Elijah** will come to take him down.”

There are advantages to this hypothesis. Firstly, it means Jesus really died trusting in God. Secondly, it explains the otherwise inexplicable “he is calling on Elijah.” Thirdly, it means that all four Gospel writers are true to the spirit of Jesus’ final prayer, with Mark and Matthew emphasising the lament and Luke and John emphasising the change to final trust, even if none is literally what Jesus finally said.

Synthesis

To draw all this material together, we begin with a summary of the results of the historical-critical method:

1. Proclamation of the Kingdom: future, present, in Jesus
2. Prophet / Son of Man: words, actions, destiny
3. Messiah / Son of David: cautious yes; including suffering then full affirmation
4. Destiny and Prayer: revealer of the Father; not drink again; Abba Father; last words

Behind this synthesis stands a vision of the ministry:

1. Proclamation to the excluded

2. Jesus' actions led to his identification with the excluded
3. Jesus' prayer led him through discernment to absolute trust / faith in God
4. The kingdom was to come not only in his words or at his hands but through his very person

In his suffering and death, Jesus becomes a victim, becomes one of the excluded himself, in the radical injustice of an unjust judicial murder. Like the prophets of old, he accepts this journey into suffering as part of his own fidelity to his mission and to his God. A summary from Paul may help at this stage:

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed— namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness. (Romans 3:21–26)

And finally,

1. Thus, even in his own life the proclamation of the Kingdom moved from a message to a person
2. Bearing in mind the apocalyptic understanding of Kingdom (esp. faithfulness)
3. Hence: king / kingdom is the great category in the trial scenes and at the crucifixion itself because it is both apocalyptic and messianic

Even though this might sound somewhat technical, the advantage is great. Because apocalyptic is dealing with “the only problem,” in the words of Muriel Spark, it means that our central proclamation is also dealing with the question of suffering and the problem of evil.

Conclusion

We notice that what is missing from this evolution of Jesus' experience is any notion that his suffering would be a payment for sin, whether of Adam or anyone else.