

ing procedures, the applications of blood in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly temple, and so forth.

These are churchly doctrines about Christ—Christology—to be distinguished from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus taught things that make a difference in how you live when you walk out of the church on a Sabbath morning: “Feed the hungry”; “Call no person your spiritual authority”; “Watch the grass grow”; “Keep your prayers short”; “Love people who despise you.”

Notes and References

1. See the book by John Dominic Crossan with the same main title, *The Essential Jesus: What Jesus Really Taught* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
2. An example of special pleading in this book gives one of the proofs of Jesus’ divinity as the number martyrs who have

died for the faith. Although it is true that an inconsequential Jew could not have aroused the devotion of so many Christians, one must also recognize how many Palestinians—and how many Al Qaeda fighters—have been willing to die for their own causes. My argument is not to diminish the role of Jesus, but to help readers hear the special pleading that makes Christian witness sound duplicitous when it allows for itself what it does not allow for others.

3. The difference between “fact” and “faith” becomes clear when used on a different religion. To which category does the statement, “Mohammed lived in the sixth and seventh centuries of the Christian era” belong? Now try, “Mohammed is God’s Prophet.” The first is a statement of fact; the second is a statement of faith. These statements illustrate the difference between the “historical Mohammed” and the “Mohammed of faith.”

4. Careful Jesus scholarship is urgently needed in the interconnected world of the third millennium, when religion is such a divisive force in a heavily armed world. Christians need to be willing to apply to their own documents and traditions the same critical scholarship that they apply to the

religions of others. For example, Islam teaches that the Koran is verbally inspired and is exactly the same in today’s published text as it was when delivered to Mohammed. However, Koranic scholars disagree with this doctrine and can demonstrate that early manuscripts differ from the published versions. Islamic scholarship shows that the Islamic doctrine is not supported by the historical data. Christians face analogous issues.

5. The author should have depended not only on Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1973): 1:62-63; and Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1998), 5 (as noted on page 149), but also on the persuasive rebuttal to Jeremias by James Barr, “Abba Isn’t Daddy,” *JTS* 39 (1988): 28-47.

6. *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

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A Gracious Exchange within the Historical Jesus Debate

Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. San Francisco: Harper, 1999.

Reviewed by Gary Chartier

The *Meaning of Jesus* is a dialogue between two New Testament scholars that focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on the historical figure of Jesus. The authors irenically articulate and defend their respective accounts of who Jesus was, what he did, how he understood himself, how he was born, why he died, what became of him after his death, what we can expect from him in the future, and what he means to us today. They also explain

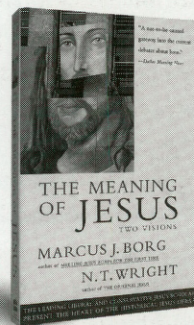
how they believe we should reach historical conclusions about him. The book is a well-written and engaging introduction to the contemporary historical study

of Jesus by scholars who are both friends and fellow Christians.

To understand *The Meaning of Jesus* and its context, it may be useful to begin with an overview

of the development of modern Christian thinking about Jesus as a figure of history.

It is a commonplace that Jewish faith and Christian faith are historical, not only in the sense that they have developed over time, but also in the sense that they concern themselves with historical events. Jews and Christians have characteristically believed that God does things in history, that divine action changes both our understanding of the human situation and the human situation itself.



For Jews, God's paradigmatic historical action is Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Whatever her precise understanding of this exodus, a traditionally minded Jew will see God's will behind the liberation of Israel and the consequent creation of a new nation. Because of what God has done, history is different, importantly different.

In the same way, Christians have traditionally seen the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as God's decisive, definitive actions in human history. They continue to disagree about just what God accomplished in and through these events. Some Christians see them primarily as media of divine self-disclosure; others interpret them as the means by which a substitutionary atonement was effected; still others understand them as unleashing a powerful dynamic that has transformed human social, cultural, and political history. The majority Christian view has been, in any case, that they matter profoundly.

Christian belief in the centrality of these events for human history has come under increasing attack since the eighteenth century. It has seemed incredible to many people that a set of events that occurred over the course of a few years in Palestine two millennia ago could be the prime instance of God's activity in human affairs. Not unreasonably, critics have asked: Why there? Why then? What about the rest of the world?

Some theologians and philosophers have asked whether history could bear the weight Christianity seemed to place on it. Faith seemed to require absolute, unswerving commitment. But historical reconstruction was always tentative, probabilistic. Historical claims could always be falsified and were

never, in any case, certain. How could Christians rely on the Gospels as they made firm commitments to Jesus if their knowledge of him was always provisional?

Also problematic from the standpoint of many historians and philosophers has been the idea that we could be confident that the sorts of wondrous events reported in the Gospels actually occurred. David Hume famously argued that a miracle, understood as a violation of physical law is a priori improbable—so improbable that it will always be more likely that evidence purporting to establish that it occurred should be discounted than that it did, in fact, take place.

Related to this epistemological challenge has been a metaphysical one. If the world operates in accordance with orderly natural laws, what room is there—critics in an era increasingly dominated by a mechanistic worldview that reflected popular understandings of Newtonian physics asked—for acts that seem so clearly to violate these laws? Given our understanding of the world, are the accounts offered in the Gospels genuinely believable?

A clear implication of this challenge was that the Gospels themselves were to be studied like other ancient historical documents. Though so-called “historical-critical” study of the Gospels is as old as the patristic period (consider, for instance, the careful work of Theodore of Mopsuestia), it took off in earnest in the nineteenth century.

Scholars focused on the textual prehistories of the Gospels, their relationships with each other and with other biblical books, parallels between them and various nonbiblical sources, the role of archaeology and ancient history in confirming or disconfirming the portraits of Jesus they offered, and

so forth. In addition, they sought increasingly to offer comprehensive portraits—biographies—of Jesus.

They often sought to depict Jesus in terms that might appear winsome to nineteenth-century liberal readers. They also attempted, regularly enough, to explain away the strange and the miraculous. Jesus didn't rise from the dead; he swooned and revived in the tomb. He didn't feed the five thousand with miraculously multiplied loaves and fishes; he encouraged his hearers to share their food with each other.

The story of their efforts has famously been told in Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer noted the domestication of Jesus in the work of his contemporaries, who had failed, he believed, to take the measure of Jesus' essential *strangeness*.

Understood in historical context, Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who incorrectly anticipated—and sought to precipitate—the end of the world. Powerfully moved by the spirit of Jesus, Schweitzer devoted his life to medical missionary work in Africa. But before his academic career in Germany had ended, he had effectively lowered the curtain on the first act in the drama of modern study of the “historical Jesus.”

Writing during the same period as Schweitzer, Martin Kähler argued—in *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Authentic Biblical Christ*—that it was ultimately the Christ encountered in Scripture and the preaching of the church who was the real Christ, not the Christ reconstructed by secular historical method. Kähler sought to leapfrog over the difficult or impossible task of ascertaining what Jesus was really like by suggesting that what mattered was the experience of

Christ mediated to us in the Bible.

Approaches that resembled Kähler's were dominant during the first half of the twentieth century. Rudolf Bultmann maintained that the sheer fact—the “that”—of Jesus' existence mattered for faith. But he sought to insulate faith from the corrosive acids of historical skepticism by declaring everything else about the historical figure of Jesus irrelevant to the Christian life.

Bultmann was quite prepared to engage in serious historical inquiry into Jesus' ministry and message, but he maintained that what mattered for contemporary Christians was nothing but the transformation effected by the grace of God encountered in the church's preaching about Jesus. Whatever the results of historical research, Bultmann said, it was the preached Christ who changed lives, who was ultimately important.

Karl Barth was much more prepared than Bultmann to affirm the historicity of the broad outlines of the Gospel narrative of Jesus. For Bultmann, it was necessary, for instance, to say only that Jesus was “risen in the *kerygma*”—that Christians should be concerned with the life-changing power of the story of the resurrection rather than with the question, What happened on the Sunday after Jesus was crucified?

Barth wanted to say much more, to affirm with other orthodox Christians that Jesus was truly made alive by God in exalted but embodied form after his death on the cross. But he wanted to do so in a way that rendered Christian historical claims immune to historical challenge. By placing key Christian claims off-limits to historical verification or falsification, he fed the unwarranted suspicion of some evangelical critics that he did not believe the Gospels' central events had really happened.

Many other scholars found themselves increasingly uneasy with the abandonment of critical history as a resource for Christian faith, which the work of each had, in different ways, encouraged. Comforting as it might be to protect the gospel from the potentially negative consequences of historical scrutiny, it seemed nonetheless as if safety from historical refutation were being purchased at the price of abandoning the central Christian conviction that God made a difference in and for history.

Thus, Bultmann's student, Ernst Käsemann, argued that Christians needed to demonstrate the existence of at least some meaningful continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ proclaimed by the church. Käsemann's brief for this position is often seen as the charter for a second quest—the so-called “New Quest” for the historical Jesus.

Chastened by the failure of the original quest, the New Questers opted for a relatively minimalist approach. They sought, not to construct elaborate biographies of Jesus that focused on his inner life and the minute details of his career, as they understood their predecessors as having done, but to spell out what they believed could be affirmed with confidence about him on the basis of sober historical research.

Based on their understanding of the origins of the Gospels and the history of the early church—often mutually reinforcing and developed in tandem—they offered careful reconstructions of Jesus' sayings and actions. Some articulated criteria designed to help them distinguish authentic words of Jesus from ones created by the early church. And they began to publish a flood of books and articles.

The results of their inquiries were

mixed. Some believed that historical reconstruction provided a firm basis for the confident affirmation of the church's historic convictions. Some were satisfied with showing the existence of minimal continuity between the Jesus of history and the Jesus proclaimed by the church. Some wondered if even this was possible.

Whereas the New Questers had concerned themselves primarily with the Gospels and had seen their task as, at root, theological, those who undertook the so-called Third Quest, beginning in the 1970s, adopted a somewhat broader focus and, often enough, a different self-understanding. They attempted to situate Jesus within the context of the ancient Mediterranean world, seeking in particular to learn about him by studying the history, culture, and texts of his Jewish contemporaries.

Many of them saw themselves less as theologians than as historians, intent on bracketing religious concerns professionally, if not personally. Their work proved fruitful and instructive. It offered richer portraits of Jesus that began to make increasing sense of his behavior in light of the dynamics of life in Israel under Roman occupation during what we now call the first century.

The scholars who have undertaken the Third Quest have included Jewish historians, like Geza Vermes, as well as Christians, including A. E. Harvey, Ben F. Meyer, E. P. Sanders, Marcus Borg, and Tom Wright. Although today's Jesus scholars find themselves speaking with confidence about some matters, they also disagree dramatically about others. Some of their disagreements are narrowly historical; others are simultaneously historical and theological. *The Meaning of Jesus* highlights both.

This book is hardly “the definitive

debate on the historical Jesus,” as the promotional copy on its back cover proclaims. It is a gracious exchange between two moderate scholars with a good deal in common. Both are Anglicans—Borg an American, Wright an Englishman. Both studied under G. B. Caird at Oxford. Both are skeptical of the reductive, materialistic, scientific cast of mind that has dominated post-Enlightenment intellectual life in the West. Both are representatives of the Third Quest (a term Wright coined), committed to understanding Jesus in the context of first-century Judaism. And both believe that faith in Jesus can and should play a key role in Christian life today.

It is certainly true that Borg is (again, per the jacket copy) a “leading liberal . . . Jesus scholar”; but his liberalism is of an overtly pious variety, rather different from that of, say, Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, or Burton Mack. And although Wright is certainly a conservative, he is no fundamentalist. He is wedded neither to an inerrantist view of the Gospels (215), nor (witness his understanding of eschatological language in the New Testament) to traditional doctrinal formulations.

Borg and Wright certainly belong on anyone’s short list of candidates for inclusion in a debate about the historical Jesus, but in “the definitive debate,” other voices need to be heard as well: the voices of other scholars—including those I’ve mentioned and, doubtless, others as well, including Jewish voices, women’s voices.

Despite their similarities, Borg and Wright differ on a variety of important and interesting issues, and their gracious exchanges make *The Meaning of Jesus* a useful starting point for the reader interested in formulating an

**Borg and Wright certainly belong on anyone’s
short list of candidates for inclusion in a debate
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adequate personal understanding of the Jesus of history. Several issues about which they disagree are particularly significant.

Both believe that we can and should use the tools of modern historiography to construct a reasonably accurate portrait of Jesus. But they differ on the question of how these tools should be employed. Borg seems to believe that we can be relatively confident in the validity of the dominant consensus regarding the prehistory and development of the Gospels.

According to this consensus, Mark and the hypothetical sayings source, Q, are our principal bases for historical judgments about Jesus. It’s unlikely that the other Gospels add a great deal to our understanding of Jesus; rather, they should be viewed as often theologically motivated elaborations on the material found in Mark and Q. Borg also emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural anthropological insights for our understanding of Jesus.

By contrast, Wright leaves open the possibility that all of the traditions found in the Gospels might be able to contribute to our picture of Jesus; he is not prepared to rule out the historicity of a given narrative or saying on the basis of

a hypothetical reconstruction of the prehistory of the Gospels. Wright emphasizes the importance of using distinctively Jewish categories to understand Jesus’ mission and message, fearing that cross-cultural analyses run the risk of obscuring Jesus’ particularity and his responsiveness to specific concerns present in his immediate social, political, and religious world.

Borg and Wright both see Jesus as actively involved in confronting the social and political realities of first-century Judaism. For both, Jesus saw Jewish opposition to Rome, and the boundary-consciousness that opposition expressed, as self-destructive.

According to Wright, “Jesus’ clash with the Pharisees came about . . . because his kingdom agenda for Israel demanded that Israel leave off its frantic and paranoid self-defense, reinforced as it now was by the ancestral codes, and embrace instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth” (43–44). Jesus called his followers to a way of life marked by the renunciation of “xenophobia toward those outside Israel” (39). Similarly, Borg focuses on Jesus’ negative assessment of first-century Jewish purity rules (73), also clearly

How important is it that what we believe
now is rooted in what Jesus and the early
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concerned with boundaries. Both see Jesus as vocally opposed to social injustice (44, 71-73). But they differ sharply over the question of whether Jesus thought or spoke of himself as Israel's Messiah. Where Borg sees the retrojection of later Christian conclusions—conclusions he maintains are correct in light of Jesus' resurrection—Wright sees Jesus' own words and deeds.

Borg and Wright disagree, not surprisingly, regarding the historicity of Jesus' virginal conception. Wright believes the best explanation for the appearance of the story of the virginal conception in Matthew and Luke is that Jesus was, in fact, conceived when Mary was a virgin. Borg argues that the stories are theologically meaningful but lack historical warrant. But Borg concedes that "[t]he birth narratives have no impact on . . . [his] reconstruction of Jesus' public agendas and his mind-set as he went to the cross" (172). "If," he says, "the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two of Luke had never existed, I do not suppose that my own Christian faith, or that of the church to which I belong, would have been very different" (178).

Borg says he does "not see the story of the virginal conception as

a marvel of biology that, if true, proves that Jesus *really* was the Son of God" (186). But neither does Wright, and neither does the Christian Church. (Aquinas was doubtless not the first to acknowledge that incarnation does not entail virginal conception.)

For Borg, the notion that Jesus deliberately sought out death and that he understood his death as salvific is problematic. He is also doubtful that Jesus' followers had any firsthand information about his trial, so he doesn't think we can be certain about the value of any of the trial accounts in the Gospels.

Borg suggests that the view that Jesus was crucified because he claimed to be the Messiah seems to track later Christian beliefs so closely that it's likely to be a *post-hoc* creation; it's most likely that Jesus was actually crucified because he was "a social prophet who challenged the domination system in the name of God" (91). That doesn't mean he is unwilling to credit any of the passion narratives in the Gospels. Borg is confident that Jesus and his disciples shared a meal immediately before his arrest and execution, that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, that Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, that Jesus was crucified, that his

crucifixion resulted "from collaboration between the . . . Roman governor and a small circle of Jewish temple authorities" (90).

Wright sees the passion narratives as much more reliable. News travels fast in traditional societies, he suggests; for instance, then, if "scholars argue . . . that because Jesus' hearings before Caiaphas and Pilate were in secret nobody would have known what happened, they are living in a make-believe world" (95). Jesus thought of himself as Israel's Messiah and, in line with the convictions of many of his contemporaries and predecessors, believed his messianic vocation would be accomplished through his own suffering and death. If Israel challenged Rome, as it seemed increasingly poised to do, Rome would retaliate brutally; and Rome "would be the unwitting but effective agent of the wrath of Israel's own God" (98).

Jesus, says Wright, "seems to have construed his vocation in terms familiar in the stories of the martyrs. He would go ahead of the nation to take upon himself the judgment of which he had warned, the wrath of Rome against rebel subjects" (98). Jesus did not seek death; but "he went to Jerusalem determined to announce his particular kingdom message in word and (particularly) in symbolic action, knowing what the inevitable reaction would be, and believing that this reaction would itself be the means of God's will being done" (99).

For Wright, the resurrection validated "Jesus as messiah" (125); Borg suggests that their resurrection experiences rightly led the early Christians to confess Jesus as Lord. But when the early Christians spoke of resurrection, Wright suggests, they had a relatively clear meaning in mind; they weren't talking about

a vague "spiritual presence" or about the immortality of the soul. The best explanation, he maintains, of the early church's belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is thus precisely that Jesus' tomb was empty and that his disciples encountered him, embodied but exalted—"neither resuscitated nor left to decay in the tomb but . . . rather *transformed* into a new mode of physicality"—after his death (122). Borg sees the empty tomb stories as irrelevant; Jesus can be alive and exalted no matter what happened to his body. What matters is that "the followers of Jesus . . . continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death" (135).

Borg regularly differentiates between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus. But he is not concerned, like many liberals, to see the post-Easter Jesus as simply a creation of the church's faith. He affirms, in light of the resurrection, that "Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord" (129). But he wishes to underscore the difference between Jesus as proclaimed after the resurrection and Jesus as he might reasonably have been characterized—or as he spoke about (or, likely, understood) himself during his lifetime.

Borg denies that "Jesus thought of himself as divine" or knew "more than his contemporaries . . . because . . . he had a divine mind" (145; I take it that by "mind," Borg means "consciousness"). However, he is equally clear that the post-Easter Jesus is a "divine reality" and "one with God" and that the pre-Easter Jesus was "the embodiment or incarnation of God" (146).

When Borg says that he believes the historical Jesus was the embodiment or incarnation of God, he apparently intends to defend a view of incarnation in accordance with which being God incarnate is a matter of being supremely inspired

by God; for Borg, Jesus was "open to the presence of God" in a way that made it possible for him to "be filled with the Spirit" (147-48).

Borg would not, I think, be comfortable with a more traditional incarnational view of Jesus that held that the will of God and the will of Jesus were numerically identical, that God was the personal subject of the life of Jesus. But it is important to emphasize that, even if he held such a traditional view, he could still quite consistently maintain that Jesus lacked the knowledge he says he believes Jesus didn't possess. A "high Christology," like the one articulated in the so-called Nicene Creed, has no particular implications regarding the extent of Jesus' knowledge. It is perfectly consistent to claim both that Jesus was God incarnate and that he did not know he was.

Toward the end of *The Meaning of Jesus*, Borg and Wright move increasingly away from narrowly historical questions, focusing instead on Christian hope and the dynamics of Christian living. Both look to an eternal future with God, but neither quite shares the views of many conservative Christians regarding the end of history.

Borg argues tentatively that belief in Jesus' second coming is a product of the early Church, prompted by Jesus' resurrection and his exalted status as Lord. He can, he says, conceive of an end to the world and a final judgment, but not a "return of Christ." "If we try to imagine that, we have to imagine him returning to *some place*. To be very elementary, we who know the earth to be round cannot imagine Jesus returning to the whole earth at once. And the notion of a localized second coming boggles the imagination" (195). But he wishes to retain the language of the second

coming as an affirmation of Jesus' present and future lordship.

For Wright, too, the language of biblical apocalyptic is metaphorical. He understands Jesus' language about judgment in light of his conviction that Jesus' focus was quite directly on contemporary events. Whereas other scholars have seen "the so-called Little Apocalypse of Mark 13 and its parallels" as concerned with the end of the world (41), Wright suggests that Jesus' real focus was on the impending fall of Jerusalem:

Many have traditionally read Jesus' sayings about judgment either in terms of the postmortem condemnation of unbelievers or of the eventual destruction of the space-time world. The first-century context of the language in question, however, indicates otherwise. Jesus was warning his contemporaries that if they did not follow his way, the way of peace and forgiveness, the way of the cross, the way of being the light of the world, and if they persisted in their determination to fight a desperate holy war against Rome, then Rome would destroy them, city, temple, at all, and that this would be, not an unhappy accident showing that YHWH had simply forgotten to defend them, but the sign and the means of YHWH's judgment against his rebellious people. (41)

Wright emphasizes that Christian hope for the future doesn't depend on a particular reading of the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels. Thus, Wright urges us to look for hope for God's creatures beyond death and for a transformed and renewed world, and for "Jesus' royal presence within God's new creation" (202).

The genteel debate between

Borg and Wright in the *The Meaning of Jesus* will introduce the reader to a variety of issues in the historical study of Jesus. It will not, of course, resolve them. Their book will encourage the reader to think clearly about the Jewish background to Jesus' ministry, about

the social and political significance of what Jesus said and did, and about the importance of thinking outside the confines of the currently popular scientific, materialistic worldview. But it will leave numerous questions on the table.

Perhaps the single most pervasive

disagreement between Borg and Wright concerns the relevance of history for faith. How important is it that what we believe now is rooted in what Jesus and the early Christians saw and did and experienced? May we think of Jesus as Lord if he didn't think of himself this way? May we think of Jesus as risen whether or not his tomb was empty? And these are not, of course, historical questions in the narrow sense; they are theological and philosophical ones.

Neither Borg nor Wright is trained primarily in philosophy or Christian doctrine, though each has obviously studied both. Those who want their theology straight may wish to consult any or all of the recent good books on Christology, including Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*; John B. Cobb Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*; David Brown, *The Divine Trinity*; Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*; William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior*; and John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* and *Christology Revisited*.

Serious theological and philosophical reflection will help us make effective use of historical insights. It will aid us in understanding just what significance a given historical conclusion might have for our beliefs. It is important, therefore, to read contemporary historical Jesus scholarship in tandem with serious doctrinal analysis. But our theology cannot proceed in abstraction from serious history. If we are to construct an adequate Christology for the twenty-first century, we will need to take work like that of Borg and Wright into account.

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