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# JESUS PROJECTS: A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

GARY S. KINKEL

As professor Anderson reminds us in his paper, scholarly interest in Jesus of Nazareth is certainly not new. What is new, perhaps, is the degree to which recent discussion, or at least one side of it, has received public attention. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note the relation between such investigations and theological concerns. Earlier Jesus researchers were often unabashed in their support of a particular theological agenda, which in turn drove their studies of Jesus. The tendency, it seems to me, in the current generation of Jesus research is to deny the presence of such agendas, but this can be misleading. Recent writers may regard their work as “merely historical” and detached from theological interests, but this move *reflects* a theological judgment, and it certainly *has* theological implications. The goal of this essay is to pose a theological critique of recent Jesus studies, paying special attention to the presuppositions underlying preferences for a new canon—that of inferred historicity—and the theological implications of such moves.

Central to our subject is the assumption that historical investigation requires a separation of one sort or another between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Present writers assert that one ought not and cannot make theological claims about Jesus of Nazareth, though they may be appropriate when applied to the risen Christ. Theological statements, it is assumed, were projected backwards upon memories of Jesus, thus distorting the gospel reader’s understanding of Jesus. This is even sometimes presented as though it were a result of demonstrated historiography, which, of course, it could not be, given that there are no alternative histories available. While there probably was some development in early Christian understandings of how Jesus was the Christ, the foundation of recent quests for the historical Jesus is the assumption that the modern scholar must find ways to “get behind the texts” in order to find out what “really” happened. To claim better knowledge about what Jesus was like than first-century gospel witnesses, however, amounts to the height of academic arrogance. In any case, what happens is that first-

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century claims about Jesus are replaced by modernistic ones, depriving Christian theology of its foundations without first establishing a theological basis for making such moves. Portraits of the “newly discovered Jesus” then tend to play theological roles accommodating post-Christian audiences in ways that seem all too convenient. This is why the interplay of theological and historical ventures demands critical scrutiny. While this essay seeks to address the larger assortment of Jesus investigations, the fact that the Jesus Seminar has received so much recent attention calls for a response to some of their operations and assertions specifically.

Separating the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history evokes several significant theological questions. The central question, of course, has to do with the relation between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ. What was it, or is it, precisely? Is one to affirm crucial theological identity statements concerning the Christ while denying the same statements concerning Jesus? Naturalistic scholars, and especially members of the Jesus Seminar, seem to say, “Yes.” If this is so, we are left with three possibilities.

First, perhaps we are talking about two distinct beings who are also two distinct persons and whose relation to each other is either vague or nonexistent. If we indeed have discontinuity, then the name “Jesus” refers to one person—one being—with a unitive identity and contiguous purposes, and the term “Christ” to another—a different being—with an alien identity and ulterior purposes. In other words, Jesus and the Christ turn out to be truncated persons with different purposes, and the life and teachings of Jesus may actually tell us nothing true about the risen Christ and the living Christ’s purposes. Whereas the leaders of the early church wrestled with these issues theologically for two centuries or more, declaring such divisions inadequate theologically, recent Jesus projects appear to drive a wedge between Jesus the man and Jesus the Christ in ways that are theologically naïve, or at least disengaged from the classic debates of historical theology. Some may even be motivated by theological deconstruction, but such is not the assertion of the present essay.

The second possibility is that one is to think of Jesus as an actual, historical person and the Christ as a feature, a product, or a projection of Christian consciousness. In this case, the risen Christ would not be a *being* at all. The Christ would have no reality or existence apart from the minds of Christians, and the statement, “The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign,” would not and could not mean

what it appears to mean. It would express nothing about the real world outside the speaker. It could only be taken as an expression of one's consciousness, perhaps even the speaker's pathology, a mere figment of religious subjectivity. Here we would have to sort out the relation between Jesus and the projection of a conviction shaped by early Christian consciousness, but if it is false to apply these theological convictions to Jesus of Nazareth, then how could there be any real relation between Jesus and the Christ? The resurrection of Jesus would be as meaningless as his death, and the heart of Christian faith—belief in the ongoing work of the risen Lord—is deprived of its power.

The third possibility is that the linking of a suffering Jesus with the victorious Christ is to be rejected entirely. All we have is a dim and obscured memory of a first-century victim of Roman violence at odds with a transcendent Christ. If one wants to keep some concept of the Christ, one still has a serious problem. It would seem that either of the above understandings of "Christ" as separate from Jesus of Nazareth leads to a non-historical Gnostic Christ; a Christ who gains content either from human consciousness and personal convictions, or from an unhistorical wraith. Neither is subject to the external controls of historical memory. Historically, whenever the Christ has been separated from the actuality of Jesus of Nazareth—a particular and concrete historical anchor—and from the Christian community's theological rules for the interpretation of Jesus Christ, talk about Christ has become the playground of human subjectivity. Thus, the term "Christ" has been co-opted, filled with content by, and made to serve and symbolize, the Roman Imperium, American military power, American or European colonial wealth and political culture, and, of course, most infamously, the radical and racist social Darwinism and murderous violence of Nazi ideology.

Less famously and far more commonly, "Christ" projections are regularly put into the service of individual purposes, neuroses, desires and rationalizations. The human ego requires an objective boundary, something over and against us, that denies and negates our fantasies of power, of infinite will, of bending the world and others to the service of our own ends. As long as human subjectivity was confronted with a limitation in the form of Jesus as he is presented in the New Testament, one could make strong critical statements against all other claims concerning Christ.

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Take, for example, *The Barmen Declaration* of 1934, where the peaceable role of Jesus as the Christ was pivotal for Confessing Christians' being able to oppose the Third Reich's hijacking of Christian and German loyalties. Without the historical anchor of the life and teachings of Jesus as reported in the gospels, their convictions about the demands of the lordship of Jesus Christ upon authentic, confessing believers would have been deprived of their moral foundation and impact. In the absence of such an objective, external constraint, persons become all the more deeply bound to and imprisoned by the "dear little self" and all its schemes, whims and designs. Luther's famous remark, which I paraphrase here, seems right: Without the external Word as judge and criterion (i.e., the historical actuality of Jesus and the Christian hermeneutical matrix as a control and limit on what may be said of Christ) one has no way of knowing whether a statement or a proposed action is from God, the human ego or the devil.

This leads to a further difficulty. It seems as though the Jesus Seminar's questions about Jesus are entirely and only a matter of historical judgment, and that theological statements are entirely and only an expression of human subjectivity. I may have misunderstood, but this mode of operating seems to follow from the notion that Christ-convictions are solely to be understood as subjectively constructed concepts that did not arise from Christian memories of Jesus, and that they were thus imposed upon them. If so, theological statements are not propositions that may be true or false with respect to states of affairs outside the self (unless one were to construct some post-modernized version of Schleiermacher's concept of self-consciousness, and like him have a way of saying that the depth of consciousness is constrained by an Other that stands over against it, relates to it and limits it). Now certainly, early Christians were describing the redemptive work of Jesus as the Christ within the frameworks of how they understood God to be at work in the world, but the question is whether these were merely the packaging and nothing more, or whether they represent authentic reflections upon God's saving and revealing invasion into human history.

If biblical theological statements are merely projections onto Jesus, then are not all religious statements reducible to human subjectivity, and do they not have the status of mere projections onto the cosmos? Are they not all on the same level as other projections? Are they not all equally true and at the same time equally false and empty?

Then, too, does not one's choice between them amount to nothing more than an exercise of personal preference—a wish fulfillment? Even if one appeals to a view like Schleiermacher's, this approach leads us directly into the icy embrace of Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Indeed, their potent and withering critiques of religion hinge upon this assumption. It is difficult to see how this approach to religion and to theological statements can avoid a slide into nihilism and keep at bay that most uncanny of uninvited guests; though Nietzsche would say, of course, that existence already is nihilism. The point is that while removing historical and theological normativity from Jesus as the Christ may seem appealing to inclusive liberals trying to “do no harm” to anyone, it also opens the gateway to those advocating the reign of power, ego or domination. Disconnecting the spiritual Christ from the normative Jesus is a perilous path indeed!

Now, I want to shift the focus a bit. There is something at least a little bit odd about taking Jesus seriously *if* theological statements about him are misleading or untrue. If the itinerant Galilean rabbi was in truth not himself the Christ, not the Savior from sin and death, not the second hypostasis of the Triune life of God and so forth, then there is no real point in talking or thinking about him anymore. It is only the theological claims about him, and the movement that formed around those claims, that render him historically significant. If he is little or nothing more than a peasant with an attitude, or a spirit-person (shaman?), a non-eschatological social prophet or a teacher of subversive wisdom and nothing more, then there is every reason not to take him seriously. Ironically, in seeking to make Jesus relevant the opposite results. The commonplace Jesus becomes less than relevant, and such a move produces several further effects.

First, apart from the theological convictions ascribed to Jesus, he has no claim on us. His person and his teaching have no binding character for anyone. Apart from the theological convictions about him he is just another sage dispensing a thoroughly human, finite and easily mistaken vision of reality. I may take him or leave him, and either way, it does not make much difference. Even if he was some sort of first-century shaman, there is no reason to think his sayings or his actions have anything to do with me—unless the theological convictions are true. But if they are not, I might just as well expect to find authentic wisdom by paying heed to Spartacus, Honi the Circle Drawer, Black Elk, Joseph Goebbels or a contemporary New Age channeller as by

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listening to Jesus. By limiting “the real Jesus” to naturalistic canons of modernism, his authority is reduced to relativity.

Second, following a distinctly brief public ministry Jesus was killed. Apart from the theological statements concerning him (and I do mean concerning *him* and not the wraith-Christ that has no clear relation to Jesus) Jesus can only be regarded as a loser and a failure. His life was wrenched away from him in torment and violence, and his movement was crushed before it could ever get beyond the Imperial backwater of Judea. The Romans were brutally successful in seeing to that. The Christian Church ceases to be a continuation of the Galilean Jesus movement, becoming an innovation disconnected from the locus of its purported origin. Apart from his resurrection from the dead and the claims that Jesus (not a disembodied Christ or a figment of someone’s consciousness) was and is the Christ, the Savior from sin and death, Lord and God, Jesus of Nazareth becomes a symbol of the victory of brute force in the world—a microscopic picture of Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem. Without the theological convictions applied directly to him he becomes a signifier of the failure and powerlessness of love; not love’s triumph.

This brings us full circle. The final point is also, in a way, the primary point—what was at stake from the beginning. The members of the Jesus Seminar (indeed, if professor Borg is right, all mainstream biblical scholarship<sup>1</sup>) hold that Christian theological assertions concerning Jesus of Nazareth are inaccurate and misleading. In other words, such things are not and cannot be true of Jesus (even if they are in some sense “legitimate” as statements about Christ). This is said to be a *conclusion* reached by scholarship.<sup>2</sup> That is, of course, impossible and question begging. It is impossible because that view cannot be read out of the texts. A Christian hermeneutical matrix, or a set of theological convictions about Jesus, determines the composition of the New Testament texts. Calling into question the Christian canon of inspired and authoritative texts for matters of historicity is one thing; doing so for the purposes of theological foundations is another. Consequently, this “conclusion” does not, and in principle cannot, come from the study of the texts because it claims to “improve” on what the original authors intended. It must be brought *to* the texts as a presupposition. Thus, what is said to be a conclusion is actually an *assumption* that functions as a criterion of judgment for what is acceptable in the texts. This is question begging because it uses as a main premise what it wants to claim as a conclusion.

Beyond the invalid argument is a serious point. At least some Jesus scholars appear to be desirous of replacing Christian hermeneutical strategies concerning Jesus because *they* seem to think them misleading or false. However, historically Christian theological statements about Jesus of Nazareth have formed a considered interpretative grid with general guidelines or rules for the interpreter. One can see this explicitly at work in such diverse figures as Irenaeus, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Friedrich Schleiermacher. It is less explicit but just as clearly operative in writers such as Thomas Aquinas, John Wesley, Count Zinzendorf and Soren Kierkegaard, but they admitted readily their theological presuppositions operative within their work, especially working with an inspired canon. For the Christian tradition this hermeneutical matrix leads the interpreter to say there is more to Jesus of Nazareth than the historian can capture. There is something transcendent which is mediated through, but not identical with, the historical. One might wish to deny this hermeneutic, but that would require a directly hermeneutical argument.

When Jesus scholars claiming “merely historical” methodologies make pronouncements, then, in the media about what their findings imply for faith, one gets the impression that they wish to supplant Christian hermeneutical strategies without engaging them directly. They seem to me to be trying to make an end run around the hermeneutical question by staking out their territory as historical, and therefore authoritative. But what they actually end up doing is attacking in the name of historical-critical methodology a rival hermeneutical stance. The clash between these two rival hermeneutics would be very interesting to explore further, I think, but it has yet to happen on an explicitly hermeneutical level.

I am grateful to professor Anderson for inviting my participation in this exchange. I have much more to say but have tried to focus on a few key questions emerging from a theological critique of recent Jesus quests. In seeking to be brief, the danger may be either the author’s imprecision or the reader’s misunderstanding. My hope, however, is that these concerns might lead to authentic hermeneutical explorations and explicit attention to the question, in the absence of Christian theological statements about him: Why should anyone care about Jesus of Nazareth?

## NOTES

1. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*



