

Standing in the Shadow of Schweitzer: What Can We Say About an Apocalyptic Jesus?

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Last April, 2006, I published a popular trade book titled *The Jesus Dynasty* (Simon & Schuster) dealing with Jesus, his family (“James and the boys”), and the birth of Christianity. The book summarizes for a non-specialist audience my take, at age sixty, on the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth based on my forty years of academic study. In style it is indeed very much an unfolding personal testimony of my own quest. The dedication of the book reads:

Ad memoriam Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965).
Missionary, philosopher, historian extraordinaire.
In whose shadow we all stand.

Albert Schweitzer’s influential work titled *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* was published in 1906—just one hundred years earlier. The better-known and brilliantly titled English edition, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, came out in 1910 (translated by W. Montgomery with a preface by F. C. Burkitt).

It is from the phrasing of this dedication in my book that I drew the title of this paper. I could have neither imagined nor anticipated the storm of attention and controversy the book generated: covers of national magazines in the U.S. and Europe; features on ABC, 20/20, and Nightline; prime-time TV specials in the UK and Germany; translations into

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twenty languages; U.S. and European best-seller lists; and, last but not least, a dismissive censor by Cardinal Egan last Easter Sunday morning to a standing-room-only crowd at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. The many thousands of e-mails and letters I have received from readers over the past nine months, mostly from the U.S., but increasingly from all over the world, have given me a selective but representative glimpse at the varied ways in which a historical-critical view of Jesus, such as the one I present, plays in the wider public arena.

Although I knew the book would be controversial, I tried hard to find a voice and a tone that would invite participation in our common enterprise as historians rather than one that would deliberately provoke or stir rancor. Yet I wanted to be very clear with my readers about my presuppositions as a historian and some of the resulting conclusions that would obviously prove to be unsettling to many—for instance, that Jesus had a human father, probably not Joseph; that Mary (Miriam) was a Jewish mother of at least seven children; that Jesus invested his life and death in a failed apocalyptic hope; that corpses don’t rise from the dead or ascend to heaven; that Jesus’s brother James, not Peter or Paul, took charge of things following his death; that almost everything the book of Acts tells us about the first twenty years of the movement is to be questioned; and that Paul, not Jesus, is more properly seen to be the “founder” of Christianity.

I have read Schweitzer’s work a half-dozen times over the years, but recently, in preparation for this paper, I read through my MacMillan 1955 edition yet again. I closed the book with a refreshed awe and respect for the sharp and keen insights Schweitzer expressed in 1906. We have come a long way since Schweitzer in the study of Christian origins, but there is another sense in which we have been dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s of many of his major insights. His critical method of dealing with sources strikes us as somewhat arbitrary and outdated. He had no Dead Sea Scrolls, no complete editions of the Pseudepigrapha, no Nag Hammadi texts, and shared none of our more sophisticated and nuanced understandings of the diverse forms of Judaism in the wider contexts of the ancient Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. Yet instinctively he seems to be “right on target so direct,” in my view at least, when it comes to understanding the historical Jesus as a man of his time. I have in mind here not only the very sparse treatment of his views on Jesus at the end of *The Quest*, but his more extensive work *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, published in 1914, as well as his later work *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, published in 1931.

Schweitzer opens his rather dense four hundred page survey of historical Jesus research down to his own time with the sentence: “Before Reimarus, no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus.” He refers, of course, to Lessing’s anonymous publication of Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s writings in 1778, and in particular the fragment “Vom dem Zweke Jesu und seiner Jünger” (“The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples”) of which he says, “This essay is not only one of the greatest events in the history of criticism, it is also a masterpiece of general

literature” (15). Schweitzer knows his heroes over the next 128 years, and he celebrates them exuberantly.

He focuses on what he calls “three great alternatives” that historical research on Jesus had to meet. The first he calls the “purely historical or purely supernatural.” This he considers decisively settled by David Friedrich Strauss’s first “Life of Jesus,” published in 1835. The second had to do with determining the priority of Mark and the Synoptic tradition over John’s Gospel, which he sees as satisfactorily worked out by the Tübingen School and Holtzmann. And finally, most important, what he calls the *eschatological* question. Here his hero is Johannes Weiss with the 1892 publication of his work on the preaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God.

In Schweitzer’s final and most important chapter, he argues that the union of what he calls “thoroughgoing skepticism” and “thoroughgoing eschatology” represents an impassible and enduring obstacle to traditional Christian theology. Jesus, according to Schweitzer, “lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself on it. Then it does turn; and crushes him” (370–71). And yet, even with this perspective—this “negative theology,” as Schweitzer calls it, of a “failed messiah”—he leaves the reader with his final chapter that he calls “Results.” He writes that “Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from him and flows through our time also,” and “it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world” (399, 401).

Apocalypticism and apocalyptic ways of thinking and living in their late Second Temple Jewish manifestations focus on the imminent “end of the age” and the wholesale overthrow of the powers that be, both visible and invisible. From the standpoint of the apocalyptic group it involves nothing less than a “cosmic takeover” through the power and agency of God, followed by a new world order, namely the rule of God and the triumph and vindication of the people of God. It has a clear linear and temporal focus, but the (normally) unseen heavenly world of Satan, the demons, and the corrupt state of the cosmos are an essential and ever-present foreground. John the Baptist, Jesus, James, Peter, and Paul all lived and violently died with this imminent hope of cosmic reversal on their lips. What they most expected to happen never came about, and what they could have never imagined—namely the second century heyday of Roman glory and power and the terrible destruction of Jewish life in the land of Israel—became a reality. This remains the fundamental historical reality. So what are we to make of this disappointment and failure?

With Schweitzer I see Jesus as a full and willing participant and key agent in these failed apocalyptic hopes and dreams. Without discounting the important ways in which Jesus’s message that the “kingdom of God has come upon you” reflected a “realized eschatology” with revolutionary social and political implications “here and now,” (as per Crossan, Borg, Wright), I nonetheless want to face squarely the stark implications of all those bodies that did not rise,

and those dead messiahs who never returned. When prophecy fails (prophetic expectations based on authoritative texts) there are three classic responses: postponement, marginalization, and allegorizing. On one level, each of these is an attempt to affirm that failure is actually success and what seems to be defeat and disappointment is victory.

There are of course ways, perhaps commendable ones, in which the ancient language and imagery of apocalyptic thinking might provide powerful symbolic expression of the human struggle against evil and the hope of a transformed world. But I would want to sharply distinguish between the symbolic and the operational, and between projection vs. agency. All bona fide apocalyptic movements carry with them profound social and political implications, and, as Cathy Wessinger has reminded us, the millennium most often comes violently (*How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 2000).

The late Norman Perrin, my New Testament professor at the University of Chicago, used to tell us that there was one thing certain in the study of the long history of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism—a 100 percent failure rate. H.H. Rowley published a collection of essays that he had delivered in 1942, during the darkest days of WWII, titled *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*. Rowley never discounts the symbolic power and potential theological meaning of apocalyptic symbols. But he offers at one point an astute observation. At the time, Hitler had taken most of Europe. General Rommel had orders to march to Jerusalem, link up with the Arab allies, and crush the Zionists once and for all. One could hardly imagine a better candidate for the Beast than Nazi Germany with its Führer. In both the United States and Britain, the Bible prophecy movement was having a heyday. Rowley wrote:

Yet where for more than two thousand years a hope has proved illusory, we should beware of embracing it afresh. The writers of these books were mistaken in their hopes of imminent deliverance; their interpreters who believed the consummation was imminent in their day proved mistaken; and they who bring the same principles and the same hopes afresh to the prophecies will prove equally mistaken. (173)

Clearly historians who see Jesus as an apocalyptic visionary are not advocating any literal appropriation of the thought world that Rowley here censures. On the other hand, even Schweitzer, in his final chapter, with all his thoroughgoing skepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology, cannot resist a bit of theologizing, or perhaps sentimentalizing, of his own.

Although this paper deals with an apocalyptic Jesus, let me close with some thoughts on Paul, our earliest and only unmediated source for the kind of apocalyptic thinking that characterized the Jesus movement up through the end of the first century C.E.

Broadly speaking, Paul presents a Hellenistic way of salvation—a particular scheme of apotheosis, or “immortalization,” set within the parameters of late Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism. The broad contours of his religious experiences—epiphany, the reception of oracles, visions, the journey to heaven, secret revelations—are all well known to us, especially from the Greek magical papyri, the Hermetic texts, and various forms of esoteric Judaism of the period. Add to that his specific expectations regarding his mission to the Gentiles, the conversion

of Israel, and the imminent parousia of Jesus as cosmic Lord, and you have it—his own particular vision and version of that most general Hellenistic (and human) hope—escape from mortality and the cosmic transformation of the world. And yet it is those very apocalyptic “particulars” that make Paul really Paul. His was not a scheme of salvation for any place or for all time. Although he has endured and been appropriated in many different ways over the centuries, from the standpoint of the history of Judaism, he belongs in those crucial years of hope and promise, before the terrible days of August, 70 C.E., when many such dreams came to an end. For Paul, the “appointed time” of the End had drawn very near (1 Cor. 7:26, 29, 31). How near is difficult to say, but he wrote that in the early 50s C.E. If he, like others in the movement before 70 C.E., expected the fulfillment of Daniel 11 and 12, with the “desolating sacrilege” set up in the Temple at Jerusalem, then events such as Gaius’s attempt to have his statue placed there (41 C.E.) and Nero’s persecution of the Christians in Rome would have fired the apocalyptic speculations of the movement to a white hot temperature (witness Mark 13). Apparently his plans to go to Spain never worked out, due to his arrest under Nero (Rom. 15:28), so his grand hope of bringing the bulk of Israel to accept Jesus as Messiah through his Gentile mission became more and more hopeless. By 70 C.E. it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain any immediate hope for the “redemption of Israel.” Others would pick up the pieces in various ways, but Paul was gone and what emerged in his name, even in the short decades after 70 C.E., was the beginning of a new and very different story.

Appendix: Apocalyptic Texts in our three earliest Christian sources:

Paul

1 Thessalonians 4:15–17: For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left to the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

1 Corinthians 6:2–3: Or know you not that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know you not that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

1 Corinthians 7:26, 29–31: I think therefore that this is good by reason of the impending distress that is upon us, namely, that it is good for a man to be as he is. But this I say, brethren, the appointed time is shortened, that henceforth both those that have wives may be as though they had none; and those that weep, as though they wept not; and those that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and those that buy, as though they possessed not; and those that use the world, as not using it to the full: for the form of this world is passing away.

Synoptic Q

3:7–9: He said therefore to the multitudes that went out to be baptized of him, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say to you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And even now the axe also lies at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

16:16: The Torah and the Prophets were until John: from that time the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man enters forcefully into it.

10:8–12: And into whatsoever city you enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you: and heal the sick that are therein, and say to them, The kingdom of God is come near to you. But into whatsoever city you shall enter, and they receive you not, go out into the streets thereof and say, Even the dust from your city, that cleaves to our feet, we wipe off against you: nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God is near. I say to you, it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city.

11:2: And he said to them, When you pray, say, Father, let your name be holy. May your kingdom come!

11:20: But if I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

22:28–30: But you are they that have continued with me in my temptations; and I appoint to you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed to me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and you shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Mark

1:14–15: Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the good news of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the good news.

3:14: And he appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach.

9:1: And he said to them, Truly I say to you, There are some here of them that stand by, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power.

11:9–10: And they that went before, and they that followed, cried, Hosanna; Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord: Blessed is the kingdom that comes, the kingdom of our father David: Hosanna in the highest.

13:30: Truly I say to you, This generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished.

14:25: Truly I say to you, I shall no more drink of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.

14:58: We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.