Brief Reflections on the Continuing Need for the Christian Religious Imagination to be Informed by Historical Jesus Research

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It can hardly be doubted that how Christians imagine the life and work of Jesus has a tremendous impact on how they understand and live out their Christian faith. The ubiquitous “What Would Jesus Do?” slogan demonstrates how dependent Christian behavior is on people’s imagined reconstructions of Jesus’ life. These imaginative reconstructions also affect attitudes toward other religious groups, most especially Judaism. I will sketch this out anecdotally and with citations from some recent publications in the following three categories: (1) The Jewishness of Jesus; (2) Jesus’ Relations with Contemporary Jews and Judaism; and (3) The Crucifixion.

1. The Jewishness of Jesus

Although thinking about Jesus as a Jew is a less novel exercise than it was a few decades ago, it is probably fair to say that the average Christian-in-the-pew does not picture Jesus in the same way that John Paul II did in these comments:

Jesus' human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. When he began to preach and teach, he drew abundantly from the treasure of Scripture, enriching this treasure with new inspirations and unexpected initiatives.1

Constructing in one’s imagination such a portrayal of Jesus can be made difficult by two factors: (A) unfamiliarity with the overall world of late Second Temple Judaism; and (B) a
widespread functional Docetism that attributes divine omniscience to all of Jesus’ words and deeds. The average Christian can hardly be faulted for not knowing much about late Second Temple Judaism since current knowledge about the period has emerged somewhat recently and does not inform much preaching or scholarship. Even people aware of such recent Catholic statements as, “Jesus was and always remained a Jew, his ministry was deliberately limited ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt 15:24). Jesus is fully a man of his time and of his environment … the anxieties and hopes of which he shared,” \(^2\) will not have their mental portraits of Jesus much affected without any knowledge of the “anxieties and hopes” of his times, which included the Roman domination of *Eretz Yisrael*, widespread apocalyptic perspectives of various types, creative diversity among Jews, including in terms of messianic expectations (for those who thought in such terms), the variety of opinions even within groups that current research neatly categorizes, and the practices of ritual purity. Without some awareness of these matters, Jesus’ purported “Jewishness” is an abstract concept into which today’s believers will pour their own expectations and misconceptions. Obviously, historical research into the Jewish world of Jesus is the antidote to this ignorance.

But historical data alone is probably insufficient to produce a full appreciation of Jesus’ Jewish identity. At a workshop on the Dead Sea Scrolls that I offered some years ago, a participant who had been restless for some time finally raised a hand and almost bursting with discomfort exclaimed, “What difference does it make what these people at Qumran thought, or this or that group of Pharisees thought, our what the Romans thought? Jesus was God and whatever he said was the truth!” The functional docetism that I mentioned above is in my opinion extremely widespread in Christianity and prevents an appreciation of Jesus as a human being even in the most generic sense. For functional docetists Jesus cannot be imagined as being
ignorant of some things or capable of being surprised. Small wonder if people do not think of him as a Jew who “nourished his mind and heart” from the traditions of his people.

Related to this is the fact that our preaching and teaching about Jesus tends to be so theologically focused as to preclude historical considerations, a somewhat ironic state of affairs for an incarnational religion. Thus, congregations tend to hear more about what Jesus teaches/taught about God than about his proclamation of God’s basileia. This reinforces the idea that Jesus’ words are a direct channeling of the mind of God rather than the Word incarnated in a specific culture and circumstance. I suspect that a huge step could be taken in addressing this problem if even this one fairly simple practice was adopted by preachers and teachers: instead of saying, “In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that God …,” frame the context with something like, “Today, the evangelist Matthew portrays Jesus speaking about ….” Done consistently, this approach would gradually encourage taking note of the distinctive Gospel portraits of Jesus, thereby opening listeners to historically informed expositions of the Gospel readings.

In addition, without grounding a homily or lesson in the world of late Second Temple Judaism, congregants’ imaginations, which will automatically be trying to envision a picture of what they’re hearing, will “fill in the blanks” about Jesus’ ministry with potentially distorted ideas about Jesus and his fellow Jews.

2. Jesus’ Relations with Contemporary Jews and Judaism

Without the benefits of historical Jesus research, Christians today tend to fall back to the “default setting” of centuries of Christian teaching about the obsolescence and corruption of Judaism during and since the time of Jesus. The caricature of Judaism as legalistic, oppressive, and heartless – when thinking of either the first century or today – is a formidable habit of
Christian minds and shapes how people picture Jesus’ ministry and purposes. The Pharisees, of course, play a particularly important role as the icons of everything “wrong” with Judaism and as the focal points of the supposed collective Jewish opposition to Jesus.

I experienced a vivid example of this confrontational pattern on the First Sunday of Lent in 2000, on the very day that Pope John Paul II in St. Peter’s Basilica prayed for God’s forgiveness for Christian sins against the Jewish people and committed the Catholic Church to “genuine fellowship with the People of the Covenant.” In my home parish at the time, a new Lenten banner was hung, proclaiming: “He fed the multitudes, he cured the sick, he raised the dead (and then beneath a large crown of thorns) – and so they crowned him king.” The banner conveyed that those people whose multitudes were fed, whose sick were cured, and whose dead were raised – i.e., Jesus’ own Jewish contemporaries – “they” were the ones who ultimately crowned him with thorns and killed him. Now the makers of the parish banner had no conscious intention whatsoever of promoting negative sentiments toward Jews. They simply used what they thought was edifying phraseology, unaware that an inherited reflex of portraying Jews as collectively hostile to Jesus was shaping their work.

The oppositional pattern is even more influential and so more potentially destructive in publications that are read by many more people than a banner in a small New Hampshire church. Among others, Mary Boys has noted the caricature of Judaism that can be found in the writings of some liberation and feminist theologians. For instance, she cites these comments by Leonardo Boff comments in his *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Maryknoll, 1987): “Observance of the Mosaic law had become the very essence of postexilic Judaism. Sophistical interpretations and absurd traditions had caused the law to degenerate into a terrible slavery, imposed in the name of God… the law had become a prison with golden bars.”
In an unpublished paper delivered last week for the International Council of Christians and Jews, Amy-Jill Levine has collected numerous samples of a “Jesus against Judaism” model from a number of books published and distributed by the World Council of Churches press, some of them written by WCC officers. Perhaps the most extreme quotation among those assembled by Levine is:

Jesus died as the result of the clash between his God [N.B. the capital “G”] and the god [lower-case “g” in the original] of Pharisaic Judaism. Judaism had encaged God in its laws and tradition and its ministers could not accept a concept of God that went beyond their own limits… Jesus’ crucifixion marked the temporal triumph of the patriarchal god of Judaism. His resurrection, however, proved that his God is the true God. But alas, Christianity has fallen back to the patriarchal god of Judaism with even greater zeal. The god of the institutional church now yields more power because the “clan” has become more powerful. The god of the clan will sanctify anything including militarism, war, sexism, apartheid, as long as it serves the interests of the clan.

In addition to the Marcionism of this perspective, there are obvious resonances with current geopolitical conflicts in the Middle-east that draw upon the enduring Christian caricature of the Torah as legalistic and its practitioners as heartless.

Characterizing Jesus as the liberator of women from oppressive Judaism is also a recurrent theme. Levine cites the words of Dimitra Koukoura:

The callous view of women and for their position which prevailed in the Graeco-Roman world was reinforced by the curse of the Mosaic law, in which sin, evil and women acquired the same negative connotations, making it impossible for women to play a creative role in social life. Women’s position was determined by reference to the man, who ruled over her, oppressed her, used her and approached or rejected her according to her menstrual cycle. […] In the New Testament we see all the marginal and stigmatized groups of the society finding a place near Christ: prostitutes, tax-collectors, Gentiles, children, those possessed by demons, lepers, bandits. For the first time, women find their place.

Finally, explicit contrasts between “bad” Judaism and “good” Jesus are plentiful. In a footnote, Levine quotes by way of example John Bluck, a New Zealand Anglican priest:

Maybe [Jesus] deliberately set about showing that God was very different from the official version begin promoted by the culture and religion of the day. For God had
become tied up and tied down in a system of ritual purity and cultural honour and social roles that divided the world into insiders and outsiders, the clean and the contaminated, the honourable and the shameful.⁶

Bluck later summarizes things by saying, “it’s a clash of systems and values: the old law of Moses reserved for some versus the new law of grace and love open to all.”⁷

In my opinion, these three quotations represent a fairly widespread perspective that can be found in Catholic and Evangelical⁸ writings as well, though not as often in the former. But to give a 1995 Catholic example:

Now Jesus . . . claims to be the promised Messiah. Their reaction swings like a pendulum from marveling at Jesus’ eloquence to being appalled at Jesus’ claim. When Jesus tries to reason with them, the situation gets unbelievably ugly. […] The episode turns out to be yet another straw in the wind of what lies ahead for Jesus: rejection by his own people and even a violent death at their hands.⁹

Given the popularity of the Jesus vs. Judaism theme in liberation-oriented Christian works, it is hard not to wonder to what degree such perspectives lie behind the recent flurry of activity in mainline Protestant churches to divest from companies operating in Israel and the Palestinian territory,¹⁰ contributing to what has been called a “new antisemitism.”

3. The Crucifixion

Of course, the deicide charge has exerted the most corrosive effect on the Christian religious imagination over the centuries. Although it would seem that few Christians today – unlike some of their medieval ancestors – would want to implicate their Jewish neighbors in responsibility for the crucifixion, the recent controversy over the Mel Gibson movie, The Passion of the Christ, suggests that many are comfortable thinking of at least a diffuse first-century Jewish responsibility. Despite the numerous relevant official Catholic statements to the
contrary, beginning with *Nostra Aetate*, this would also seem to be the case among Catholics, if the Gibson affair provides a reliable indication.

*The Passion of the Christ* was a cinematic production, created by an actor who apparently is in a schismatic relationship with the Catholic Church, which presents a physically impossible depiction of the sufferings of Jesus in which most Jewish characters not affiliated with him are unaccountably intensely malevolent. The movie directly contradicted explicit Catholic teaching that different elements from the four distinct Gospel accounts cannot be so mingled so as to increase Jewish evildoing. For example, the film combined Pontius Pilate’s ordering Jesus to be scourged in a vain effort to release him, found only in the Gospel of John, with Pilate washing his hands of responsibility before a riotous Jewish crowd, which is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. It further violated explicit Catholic teaching by introducing non-biblical elements that accentuated Jewish wickedness, including Jews throwing a chained Jesus off a bridge, Pilate offering Jesus a drink, Jews paying other Jews money to assemble to demand Jesus’ death, a Satanic figure moving among Jewish priests watching the scourging, Jewish children morphing into demons, and the heart of the Jewish temple being demolished by an earthquake when a heavenly tear falls to earth upon Jesus’ death.

Too many Catholics were among the throngs of Christians who perceived no problems with the film’s portrayal of Jews. Some bishops were caught up in the marketing frenzy, as when Archbishop John Foley, an American who is president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, bewilderingly stated, “There’s nothing in the film that doesn’t come from the Gospel accounts. So if [people are] critical of the film, they would be critical of the Gospel. It was very faithful to the Gospel.” This dangerous bestowal of biblical authority on a mere Hollywood movie was one of the promotional tactics employed by the film’s producers and was
repeated over and over again by unofficial but Catholic entities such as Zenit News Service, *Inside the Vatican* (both Legion of Christ organs), *Crisis* Magazine, and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

But my main point here is that the episode demonstrates the widespread ignorance of historically demonstrable facts about the circumstances of Jesus’ execution (such as the relationship between Pilate and Caiaphas) among the general public and numerous ecclesiastical leaders. To my knowledge, only a handful of Catholic bishops, including Richard Sklba, and one episcopal conference (France) critiqued the film with any historically-critical awareness, and in some cases were criticized by other bishops who were encouraging their communities to see the film (including some with considerable experience in Catholic-Jewish dialogue). While some of these dynamics owe more to ecclesiastical politics than hostility to Jews, combined with the widespread notion of collective contemporary Jewish opposition to Jesus, it seems an unavoidable conclusion that the overall Christian religious imagination is little informed by historical research.

4. A Concluding Thought

Within the Catholic community, another dimension to consider, as hinted in the preceding paragraphs, is the place of biblically critical scholarship in the life of the church. Surely, how Jesus is conceived in the minds of the faithful must be a central concern of the magisterium. Since that exercise of the religious imagination has historical aspects – because its concern is with Jesus acting within a specific historic setting – centrist, balanced presentations of the basic fundamentals of historical Jesus research that acknowledge where evidence is slight or
conclusions uncertain need greater prominence in Catholic teaching and preaching than they have thus far received.


5 “Women in the Early Christian Church” in Deborah Malacky Belonic, Orthodox Women Speak (Geneva: WCC Press, 1999), pp. 70 and 76.


7 Ibid., p. 50.


10 For a fairly complete list of primary resources, see: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/topics/Israel_divestment.htm.

11 See the comments of Cardinal Roger Mahony, Catholic archbishop of the archdiocese where Mel Gibson resides, in a Feb. 20, 2004 discussion hosted by Beliefnet.com at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14062_1.html. Mel Gibson is constructing a church building in Malibu, but says Mahony, “It is certainly not in communion with the Universal Catholic Church nor the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.” Cardinal Mahony also noted that, “If one chooses to set aside any of [the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council], then they choose to separate themselves from the unity of the Church.” For Gibson’s public comments on the Second Vatican Council see http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson_ii.asp, including his 1990 statement on CNN that “the Roman Church is wrong, but I believe it is at the moment, since Vatican II.”

12 See: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/education/PASSION_resources.htm#cathteaching

13 For a fuller analysis of the movie’s use of biblical and non-biblical sources, see: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/reviews/gibson_cunningham.htm

