



Lay Preachers' Conference

Jesus the Jew – the quest for the historical Jesus

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Why a “quest”?

It's all about how Jesus was understood by his peers, and how he understood himself in his own context – only then can we work out what he might mean for us.

But why is there even a debate? Because people still insist on reading the New Testament as historical when it's not: are the gospels a relatively accurate history, or is it a case of Jesus the man as distinct from the Christ of faith?

Assumptions for this presentation

- The gospels are not history in the modern sense of the word
- History was not the purpose of the gospels: their purpose was to awaken and sustain faith [John said so in as many words].
- Therefore faith and history are intertwined.
- TIME – oral tradition at the time of Jesus was strong and stable, but also the writers wrote looking back from their place in time, and included the concerns of the church of their time in the stories of Jesus [MH a kind of “What would Jesus do?” narrative.]

How then are we to discern the religion *of* Jesus (what he preached) as opposed to the religion *about* him (what others say)?

Recovering the historical Jesus

Is that even possible?

Portrayals of Jesus change over time. It is essential first of all to recover his context.

- 586 BCE First Temple destroyed
- 586f Exile
- 538 Cyrus comes to power in Persia, permits Jews to return home
- 515 Second Temple built / finished
- 450 approx Ezra, covenant renewal – and the end of the period of Jewish Scriptures: see

Nehemiah ch 7-8.

But NB – the people did not understand the Torah: it was written in Hebrew but ordinary people spoke Aramaic. Ironically, it was at this time that Torah became canon for the Jews. This (recognising scripture as canon) was the final event in (Jewish) biblical times.

So there are no more prophets – the people who bring a new word from God to the people – [if there were, their words would have been recorded]. So now what is needed is the scribe: scholar, interpreter. The focus of scripture shifts from hearing God to instruction: the Beth Midrash (Study House) is established as an alternative to Temple and synagogue.

The Temple Priests, including Sadducees
>> the synagogue Scribes, including Pharisees
>> Beth Midrash Rabbis

The interpretation of scripture is at the core of religious activity at this time; we see how Jesus frequently adds his own interpretations to what has gone before, eg the Sermon on the Mount. And those interpretations were collected together and seen as authoritative; and all those competing groups, along with Essenes, Zealots and more, had their own collections of interpretative texts. Jesus was just one more.

The context of constant, vigorous debate was simply normal – and it continues to be so. A Gentile person meeting a Jewish family for the first time will probably experience serious culture shock. Many of Jesus' recorded conversations occurred within this context – we need

to know that the strength of debate was nowhere near as confrontational for him as it seems to our ears. It was all very diverse; there were many versions of the future hope of Israel.

Sectarianism ruled

Sadducees – aristocrats, Hellenised, Temple management (sacrifice system, law, law court ...) – and the political class who dealt with the occupying Roman forces

Pharisees – widespread popular appeal (but they in fact looked down on those supporters); they saw the home as a mini-Temple, the table as a mini-altar, and so insisted on the need for ritual washing and cleanliness at meal times. Their zeal for Jewish tradition was strong.

Pharisees and Sadducees were frequently in conflict over:

- Political reality vs religious piety
- The nature of the human person: Hebrew tradition of the Pharisees taught the body/soul unity, whereas the Sadducees, being Hellenised, had picked up the notion of life after death and so the possibility of resurrection

Essenes – were established in protest against the actions of a particular person and withdrew to the desert, becoming an apocalyptic sect.

Various **revolutionary groups** – including the Zealots, reacting against Roman rule

Other **apocalyptic groups** – their values included some aspects of the Jesus movement

Hellenised Jewish believers – Paul comes out of this world; and maybe Jesus too.

The role of sects needs to be understood if Jesus is to be correctly interpreted.

Matthew 22:23-33

The question of resurrection

The political trick question. The Sadducees were astounded by Jesus' answer; the Pharisees would not have been at all surprised.

** This is just one example that shows that Matthew clearly supports the Law – where Matthew has Jesus disagreeing with Law, it's never to dismiss it, only to enhance it.

The greatest commandment – Jesus' reply is a direct quote of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and of Rabbinic writing.

The question of David's son – it's a loaded question [but was it Jesus' question or Matthew's?]

Jesus quotes the words of a psalm – and all the psalms were held to be written by (the greatest King) David; but David himself calls the Messiah "Lord", so how can the Messiah be a son of David?

This is a Matthew exegesis on this psalm, and he's saying the Messiah is the son of the Lord – a rare claim in the gospels.

Jesus – Judaism – Jewish Law

The synagogue was part of Jesus' world and life – see Luke ch 4 for example. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the synagogue took the place of the Temple (although it took quite some time for that to be established. *Matthew* was written during this transition time.

There were multiple *festivals*.

Fringes and phylacteries – *tzitzit and tefillin*: tzitzit are commanded by Numbers 15; the Pharisees interpreted Deuteronomy 11 as commanding tefillin; were these part of Jesus' world? Probably yes:

1. the woman who touched the fringe / hem of his coat: was the Greek *hem* or *fringe*? (MH Luke clearly has fringe, Matthew has edge, Mark is not specific.)
2. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for their over-sized tzitzit and tefillin, designed for showing off how “holy” they were. But Jesus probably did wear them.

Clean and unclean

Mark 7 and Matthew 15 relate how some Pharisees complained that Jesus’ disciples ate without first washing their hands in the prescribed way. But they are different.

Both quote Jesus – nothing going into a person from outside can make him “unclean”; it’s what comes out from inside that does that.

Mark [written first] then adds – Jesus declared all foods are fit to eat.

Matthew omits that remark, does not copy it across; indeed, such a notion would have been completely wrong for Matthew.

What’s going on?

For Mark’s Gentile audience, dietary law is a non-issue, and Mark’s comment is a valid observation based on other teachings of Jesus.

For Matthew, ritual matters do still matter.

But Jesus himself, and observant Jew, would never have said such a thing.

The rest of the story clearly declares that, while ritual matters, inner attitude matters even more: if the attitude is all wrong, no amount of ritual correctness is going to do any good.

A higher standard of righteousness

Matthew 5:17-20 – do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have come ... to make their teachings come true. ... not the least point or smallest detail will be done away with. ... [But] I tell you that you will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven only if [your righteousness exceeds that of] the Scribes and Pharisees.

The Sermon on the Mount is Matthew’s commentary (cast as Jesus’ commentary) on aspects of the Law. The above declares that observance matters – it could not be clearer. BUT – you must be more righteous than the Pharisees?? What??? How can anyone do that?

Well the examples follow:

- Adultery – don’t even think about it.
- (Murder – don’t even be angry)
- Divorce – no selective legalism: no remarriage at all.

(Rabbi Hillel was very liberal on this matter; Rabbi Shammai was very strict.)

On the surface it looks like Jesus v the Pharisees – that’s certainly how Matthew portrays it. But – this is *written* after the end of the Temple; the Sadducees have disappeared off the political map; the Essenes have joined the Zealots and all perished at Massada. Jesus and the Pharisees are the only groups that remain. This is a debate over the question of Jesus as Messiah. Eventually the Pharisees developed into Rabbinic Judaism and became the mainstream; but at the time of writing, this was not finalised.

It’s also in the context of Paul’s writings, for example to the Galatians, where he asserts that the Law is irrelevant to them now that Christ has been on the scene; indeed Paul vociferously condemns those who would try to drag the Galatian believers back through the barbed-wire fence of Judaised religion. (Not to forget that, writing to the church in Rome a few years later, Paul declares that the Law still stands for Jewish people, and God remains faithful to that Law: it’s just not a demand for Gentiles.) Matthew isn’t having any of this Paul liberalism – Law matters; but attitude matters even more.

Passover and the Last Supper

Get the timing right.

<i>In Matthew, Mark, Luke</i>		<i>in John</i>
Jewish time	Our time	Jewish time
Day of Preparation	Wed sunset	Thursday
Slaughter of lambs begins		Noon
Find the guest room		Afternoon
Passover	Sunset	Day of Preparation
Passover meal	Evening	Meal (not Passover)
Trial	Overnight	Trial
Crucifixion	Friday	
Death	Noon	Death **
Dark	12-3pm	
Burial		Burial
Sabbath	Sunset	Sabbath Passover begins
	Saturday	

** In John's version, Jesus dies right as the Passover lambs are slaughtered – this is a new interpretation of Passover.

^ Unlike in the present day, the Passover meal of Jesus' day was a basic affair of bitter herbs, non-yeast bread and roasted lamb; it took about 15 minutes. [These days, it can take all evening!] There are multiple Passover links in the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion.

^ 1 Cor 5:7f testifies to the benefits to a person of another person's sacrifice.

^ Jesus' new words of explanation of the Passover (my body, my blood, as a memorial) attest to the new significance of the meal; but Christian interpretation still needs to be made taking its Jewish origins seriously.

Note also that in John, the Eucharistic element is not associated with the Passover, which commemorated rescue and escape from slavery; rather, Jesus is earlier describes as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – this is an entirely new interpretation.

Question – did Jesus establish the Eucharistic rite, or were the words attributed to him by the early church?

James Tabor, member of the Jesus Seminar, refers to Paul's words describing what he "received"; but is it historically likely that Jesus would have said such a thing? Probably not. Not least because Jews do not consume blood, including the blood of an animal. If he is correct, then what we have is Matthew reflecting a transformation of the old Jewish ritual by a later Christian church.

Answers to the question will reflect a pre-existing theological position. Christians who believe that Jesus established an actual church – not just a theology but an organisation as well – will tend to believe that he also established the sacraments. Those who believe that Jesus led a movement and never intended a separate religious order will find any notion of a new ritual order completely incompatible with Jesus' wider purpose. Neither point of view can be proven.

Paul's Christology

Jesus the Jew was already transformed into a cosmic myth of salvation before Paul wrote any of his letters. Paul says almost nothing about the actual life of Jesus and seems to be interested in even less – he is focussed entirely on his *significance* for humanity. An interesting question for debate is: if Paul had had a son, would he have had him circumcised?

The answer? Probably yes.

But for Gentiles, Paul recognised that Jewish Law was less relevant. He can be seen as an anomalous Jew. Where do we place him on the *Orthodox* ----- *Hellenised* spectrum of Judaism? Paul did a job on Jesus, the man of history, that has left us ever since on a quest to rediscover the historical Jesus.

Jesus and the Jews of his day

The embarrassing matter of anti-Semitism

In Matthew

Jesus was quite opposed to the Sadducees, close to the Pharisees – so why do the gospels portray so much opposition to the Pharisees? It arose out of the contest between Jesus' followers and Pharisee / Rabbinic Judaism in the years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE – a contest written back into the life story of Jesus.

But in any case, there were disputes – he was a Jew! Jews do that stuff! But we should neither exaggerate or minimise that cultural reality.

Matthew 23 has Jesus tell people to obey the Scribes and Pharisees but not copy their behaviour. But it's not to be interpreted as anti-Jew or anti-Judaism – he was talking to and about fellow Jews. Jeremiah did the same. This is the language of the prophet.

Matthew 27:11-26 is the story of Jesus before Pilate: Pilate wants to release Jesus, but the people demand Barabbas. Only Matthew records the people declaring *let his blood be upon us and our children ...* . devoid of context, this has led to anti-Semitism; but it's also historically unlikely, according to Amy-Jill Levine – but it suits Matthew's agenda.

^ Matthew is anti-*Jerusalem* – the Messiah is born in Bethlehem.

^ The Great Commission is delivered in Galilee, whereas Mark and Luke both end up in Jerusalem.

Matthew's is the most Jewish of all the gospels; his polemic is directed solely at the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, not the people generally. The children of Matthew's infamous quote will be those who were indeed children at the time of Jesus, who survived the Jewish revolt of 70 CE and are now struggling to find a place in their shattered world.

In John

"The Jews" as a repeatedly defined group appear only in John. Notoriously, in ch 8, they are described as being in league with the devil and blind to the truth. It is historically unlikely that Jesus would have said any such thing to fellow Jews. But John has an interest in divorcing Jesus from his Jewish roots – for reasons similar to Matthew's around the separation of Christianity from Judaism.

Jesus' suffering and death

The assertion of the reality of the event is historically sound – but writers make choices about how they describe it.

Mark 15 has mockery > dark for 3 hours > "My God, my God, why ...? > death.

This is a direct quote of Amos 8:4, 9-10 and of Ps 22. Making it a “fulfilment of prophecy” turns this everyday event into something highly significant. It’s not just “What Happened?” but “What does it all mean?”

Raymond Brown [*Death of the Messiah*] and Dominic Crossan [*Who Killed Jesus?*] have brought contrasting approaches to the Passion narrative.

Both recognise the essentially theological character of the Gospels and their late first century origins but differ on the question of how to read and appraise the Passion narrative.

Raymond Brown

- Ultimately there were eyewitnesses and earwitnesses who were in a position to know the broad lines of Jesus’ passion
- From the earliest days available raw material could have been developed into a Passion Narrative extending from the arrest to the burial
- Passion narratives are characterised by “verisimilitude”

Dominic Crossan

- No detailed historical information about Jesus’ crucifixion in the Passion narrative
- The narrative sheds light on the historical circumstances of those who composed, not of the characters in the narrative
- The Passion narratives presents a post-Crucifixion interpretation of Old Testament prophecy
- The Passion narratives are not *history remembered* but *prophecy historicised*.