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JESUS THE VICTIM*

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I. The Original Quest of the Historical Jesus

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl, the influential theologian who taught for many decades at the University of Göttingen, defined the kingdom of God as the achievement of the universal moral community. This, he proposed, is the goal of the divine action in the world and the purpose of the ministry of Jesus. As God's action is motivated by his love, Jesus incorporates this love in his teaching as well as in his suffering and death. Jesus indeed *is* God, but only insofar as he represents fully God's moral purpose for humankind. Nothing in the ministry of Jesus documents Jesus' divinity in metaphysical or supernatural terms. Rather, this divinity is revealed because Jesus as a human being remained faithful to his vocation to the very end, in spite of the resistance and hatred of the world. What Jesus demands of us is to make the kingdom of God a reality in this world; we can fulfill this demand if we live the life of love and patience that has been revealed in Jesus. The goal of the kingdom of God is the uniting of the entire world as a community, in which the love of God is realized by all as the moral purpose of God's creation and of all human life.

It was this understanding of Jesus' divinity, as wholly defined by Jesus' faithfulness to God's moral purpose, that was called into question by the rebellious young scholars of the Göttingen history-of-religions school: Johannes Weiss, William Wrede, Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Bousset, Ernst Troeltsch, later also Hugo Gressmann, Wilhelm Heitmüller, and Rudolf Otto. Hermann Gunkel's dissertation, "The Activities of the Holy Spirit," published in 1888,¹ ended once and for all an understanding of the Holy Spirit as the guiding principle of institutionalized religion and secularized moral action — an understanding that dominated, as Gunkel stated, "exegetes who are influenced by unhistorical and rationalistic thinking."² On the contrary, he

* The presidential address delivered 23 November 1991 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Allis Plaza Hotel, Kansas City, Missouri.

¹ H. Gunkel, *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes nach der populären Anschauung der apostolischen Zeit und der Lehre des Apostels Paulus* (3d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909).

² *Ibid.*, iii.

argued, the Bible understands “spirit” as the uncontrollable and supernatural power of miracle, irrational inspiration, and divine action.

Johannes Weiss’s book *The Preaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God* appeared a few years later in 1892.³ It no longer offended his father-in-law, Albrecht Ritschl, who had died three years earlier. This book, as well as those of his other Göttingen friends, advertised the discovery that the rationalistic and moralistic categories of their time were not capable of comprehending the early Christian concept of the kingdom of God. Whereas these categories had their roots, as Johannes Weiss states, in Kant’s philosophy and in the theology of enlightenment, Jesus’ concept of the kingdom of God was informed by the apocalyptic mythology of ancient Judaism and was thoroughly eschatological, messianic, and supernatural.

Albert Schweitzer characterized Johannes Weiss’s work as the beginning of a new area in the life-of-Jesus research. Recognizing its significance, he asks why the book did not have an immediate impact:

Perhaps . . . according to the usual canons of theological authorship, the book was much too short — only sixty-seven pages — and too simple to allow its full significance to be realized. And yet it is precisely this simplicity which makes it one of the most important works in historical theology. It seems to break a spell. It closes one epoch and begins another.⁴

What was characteristic for this new epoch of the view of Jesus? Albert Schweitzer described this well at the conclusion of his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

The study of the Life of Jesus . . . set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our own time as a Teacher and Savior. . . . The historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future . . . will draw the portrait, can never render modern theology the services which it claimed from its own half-historical, half-modern Jesus. He will be a Jesus who was Messiah, and lived as such, either on the ground of literary fiction of the earliest Evangelist, or on the ground of a purely eschatological Messianic conception.⁵

II. The New Quest of the Historical Jesus

The insights of the history-of-religions school dominated the interpretation of the preaching of Jesus and his ministry for the first half of the

³ J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892; 2d ed. 1900; 3d ed. 1964).

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1959). This work was first published in the year 1906 under the title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr). The first English translation of the second edition of Schweitzer’s work (now entitled *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*) appeared in 1910 (London: Black).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 398–99.

twentieth century in critical New Testament scholarship.⁶ What has come to be known as “A New Quest of the Historical Jesus” was quite well aware of the danger of modernizing Jesus. Ernst Käsemann, who opened the “new quest” with his lecture of 1953,⁷ vehemently rejected the continuation of the old type of life-of-Jesus study.⁸ The new quest of the historical Jesus was informed by the search for the historical foundation of the Christian kerygma. It had no interest in bypassing the proclamation of the early Christian community in order to get uninhibited access to a real and original historical Jesus. On the contrary, James M. Robinson, who has coined the formulation “A New Quest of the Historical Jesus,”⁹ had titled his original lecture “The Kerygma and the Quest of the Historical Jesus.”¹⁰ What was at stake here was the validity of the Christian kerygma. Is this kerygma bound to a myth, a mere legend? Or is it formed as a response to the life and death of a human being and to his words and actions?

Like Albert Schweitzer’s “(old) quest of the historical Jesus,” the “new quest” also rejected unequivocally all life-of-Jesus study. Käsemann insisted that Christian faith can never rest on such knowledge; it remains bound to the proclamation of the kerygma, in whatever form.¹¹ For those who are inclined to disregard the Christian kerygma and who want to go directly to the historical Jesus, the search will never produce anything but an artificial justification for their cause, however worthy.

Nevertheless, almost exactly one hundred years after the first publication of the discoveries of the history-of-religions school, the renaissance of the quest of the historical Jesus has returned full circle to a position that is not unlike that of Albrecht Ritschl and of the portraits of Jesus drawn by the nineteenth-century authors of a “life of Jesus.”

In a recent article, Marcus Borg describes two fundamental features of this renaissance: (1) “The eschatological consensus that dominated much of this century’s Jesus research . . . had seriously eroded.” (2) “We . . . not only know more ‘facts’ about first-century Palestine, but we also understand the dynamics of that social world better.”¹² To be sure, the degree to which

⁶ For a general survey of the influence of the work of Johannes Weiss, see Dieter Georgi, “Leben-Jesu Theologie/Leben-Jesu Forschung,” *TRE* 20, 570–72 (bibliography pp. 573–75).

⁷ E. Käsemann, “Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus,” *ZTK* 51 (1954) 125–53; Eng. trans. “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SBT 41; London: SCM, 1964) 15–47.

⁸ See his critical discussion of Joachim Jeremias’s call for a return to the Jesus of history: “The ‘Jesus of History’ Controversy,” in Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 24–35.

⁹ This is the title of James M. Robinson’s book in its English edition (SBT 25; London: SCM, 1960).

¹⁰ The German edition of his book retains the original title: *Kerygma und historischer Jesus* (2d ed.; Zurich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1967).

¹¹ Käsemann, “The ‘Jesus of History’ Controversy,” 24–35.

¹² M. Borg, “Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship,” *HTR* 84 (1991)

eschatology is seen as informing Jesus' ministry is different in these portraits discussed by Marcus Borg.¹³ But all more recent attempts want to reconstruct a historical Jesus while bypassing the early Christian kerygma.

Such moves are consistent with the primary methodological approaches to those materials that can be assigned to the historical Jesus. The various portraits of Jesus that have come to us in ancient Christian materials are the result of the theologizing of the early Christian churches. It seems a matter of course that one isolates those units of the tradition which are not completely altered, or even altogether created, by eschatological and other theological interpretations, which were put forward later by the early church. What must be stripped away are early attempts at gnosticizing or catholicizing Jesus' message, adherence to patriarchal, anti-feminist, and hierarchical structures of society, the desire to establish rule and order in religious communities with their worship, liturgy, creeds, and systems of subordination. What emerges in all instances is a portrait of Jesus, drawn as scientifically verifiable history, which is free of these secondary accretions and alterations. It makes little difference here, whether one ascribes the new-found insights just to Jesus himself or to Jesus *and* to the earliest group of his followers, no longer called "the early church" but "the Jesus movement."¹⁴ The latter approach is certainly more judicious. However, in each case one is dealing with phenomena that are assigned to dates earlier than the first Christian texts, both the Pauline letters and the earliest Gospels, because it

1-22. The recent book by Dale Allison (*The End of the Ages has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] esp. 101-14), once more arguing for the eschatological character of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, seems to be incompatible with a new consensus that has emerged from the current renaissance of scholarship concerning Jesus' preaching and ministry.

¹³ E. P. Sanders depicts a historical Jesus who is entirely in agreement with certain eschatological and messianic concepts of the Judaism of his time (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985]). For Richard Horsley, Jesus belongs firmly to the radical prophetic, and in this sense "eschatological," tradition of Israel; see his *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (with John S. Hanson; Minneapolis: Winston-Salem, 1985); idem, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); idem, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989). Burton Mack denies any relationship of Jesus' ministry to Judaism and its apocalyptic mythology (*A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988]). For Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whatever could be called eschatological in the earliest Jesus movement is integrated in Jesus' understanding of himself as the prophet and messenger of Sophia (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Crossroad, 1983]). Marcus J. Borg, although he depicts Jesus as part of the charismatic-prophetic tradition of Israel, also denies the essential significance of eschatology in Jesus' message and ministry; see his *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York/Toronto: Mellon, 1984); idem, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹⁴ The word "church" seems to have very negative connotations; "movement" seems to be preferable today. I cannot help but remember that Hitler and the National Socialists called their own endeavor a "movement" (*Die national-sozialistische Bewegung*).

is evident that the deterioration into an ecclesiastical establishment and organized religion was a very early process. Thus the very brief period of the ministry of Jesus and an equally brief period after Jesus' death emerge as the only enlightened time, which might have been extended for a few more decades only in the isolation of the rural areas of Galilee among followers of Jesus who ultimately composed the Synoptic Sayings Source. In any case, while the "new quest," thirty years ago, was concerned with the discontinuity between Jesus the preacher and the kerygma in which Jesus had become the object of the proclamation, the more recent portraits of Jesus find a continuity between Jesus' historical sayings and the use of these sayings among his followers—and ultimately between Jesus and ourselves.

The tendency in recent scholarship toward a noneschatological Jesus is, of course, closely related to the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* and to the hypothesis of an earlier stage of the Synoptic Sayings Source (Q), in which the apocalyptic expectation of the coming Son of man was still absent¹⁵—a hypothesis that I myself have supported. It is questionable, however, whether this early stage of Q can really be defined as noneschatological,¹⁶ even more doubtful whether one can draw from such observations the conclusion that the preaching of the historical Jesus had no relation to eschatology.¹⁷

Other factors that contribute to the portrait of a noneschatological preaching of the historical Jesus are the terms of our own view of the world, which leaves little room for reckoning with supernatural powers such as God and Satan, not to mention apocalyptic mythologies. We are again on the way toward a human Jesus who is just like one of us, one who holds values that are very close to our ideological commitments, a Jesus who is a social reformer and who attacks patriarchal orders, a Jesus who, as a real human person, can stand as an example and inspiration for worthy causes. This stands in stark contrast to such scholars as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Their worldview did not include an eschatological orientation either, but they acknowledged that Jesus' mythical and eschatological worldview was an utterly strange feature that left them bewildered and did not allow the development of an image of Jesus that would fit their categories.

Of the Jesus of Paul and of the Gospels, Albert Schweitzer knew that he is a life-giving power, but at the same time one who "Himself destroys again the truth and goodness which His Spirit creates in us, so that it cannot rule the world."¹⁸ However, of the historical Jesus he remarks: "We can . . . scarcely

¹⁵ John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Studies in Antiquity and Ancient Christianity; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); see also my *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 133–49.

¹⁶ The myth of Wisdom is in itself eschatological. The Wisdom of Solomon speaks of a future or transcendental vindication of the rejected righteous people.

¹⁷ Even the *Gospel of Thomas* presupposes, and criticizes, a tradition of eschatological sayings of Jesus.

¹⁸ Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 2.

imagine the long agony in which the historical view of the life of Jesus came to birth. And even when He was once more recalled to life, He was still, like Lazarus of old, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes.”¹⁹ And Albert Schweitzer had enough courage and honesty to design his personal moral and religious commitment without the blessings of the Jesus of history.

III. The Historical Jesus and the Christian Proclamation

For whatever reason, there is no question that the true historical Jesus, that extraordinary human person, remains a very intriguing and attractive topic even today. The widespread interest in the newly discovered *Gospel of Thomas* proves the point. Perhaps this gospel reveals the real and uncontaminated Jesus as well as his most original words. Be it simple curiosity, be it in the service of a serious religious search, or be it in the interest of a vital ideological commitment, to have Jesus on one’s side is evidently important even in the postmodern late twentieth century. The general public’s interest in, and sometimes very hostile reaction to, the findings of the “Jesus Seminar” illustrates the point. On the other hand, one might refer to the continuing claim of evangelical Christians that it is Jesus himself, and he alone, who provides the foundation for their religious commitment. Whether it is the Jesus one seeks as a personal savior, or a historical Jesus who might respond to a cherished cause—the question is still the same. The only difference is that critical scholars might claim that, as historians, they have some advantages over the more simple-minded believers in Jesus as their savior, a more accurate knowledge of the historical and social situation in first-century Palestine, a better critical ability to identify sources, a more learned approach to the reconstruction of past history. But is the fundamental question really different?

The problem of the historical Jesus has been short-circuited here, because access to the historical Jesus as a person has become the very *first* item on the agenda. Such an approach has its pitfalls, because it isolates persons of the past from their historical context and from the situation in which those who transmitted all available information were called into a departure for new shores. Isolation from the historical context is especially hazardous in the case of Jesus, as also in the case of Socrates or of Julius Caesar. All three, Socrates, Caesar, and Jesus were either executed or murdered. That was experienced by their followers as an event that radicalized their critical interpretation of that world. For Plato, the historical Socrates could no longer explain the world that had radically changed because of his death. For Augustus, what mattered was Caesar’s testament that gave him the legitimation and the vision to create a new world. For the disciples of Jesus,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

his execution implied a denial of all values of a world order that had made Jesus its victim. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates speaks as one who has already experienced that the soul is immortal. In Augustus's politics, the murdered dictator became the *divus Julius*, the god Caesar. Jesus' followers endeavored to write paradoxical biographies of a Jesus whose words and works are those of a being who had already died and had risen to a new life.

While a reflection about Jesus' death plays no central role in the more recent portraits of Jesus, all early Christian traditions are acutely aware of this fact. All sources—and this includes the tradition of the wisdom sayings and its theology—agree that the tradition about Jesus must be seen in this light: his rejection, suffering, and death. Whatever the personal aspirations and hopes of Jesus of Nazareth were, his message of the coming of God's kingdom did not leave him as the victor, but as the victim. The entire tradition about the historical Jesus is bound into the testimony of his followers, who were charged to design a new order of the world in which the victim was vindicated.

To be sure, some went out to imitate the great Jesus in their own performance of miracles and religious demonstrations. Jesus as a great person became the standard for following him. This portrait of Jesus as the divine human being has haunted especially the spirit of Western culture ever since. It became important and frightening in the nineteenth-century idea of the genius, from Goethe to Nietzsche and Adolf Hitler;²⁰ a development that was not unrelated to the life-of-Jesus research.

In another instance, the message of Jesus the victim was spelled out in more metaphysical terms. Jesus was seen as Wisdom/Sophia, who had come into this world but was despised and rejected and so returned to her heavenly abode (John 1:5, 9–13; *Gos. Thom.* 28). The response of the believer here is the development of realized eschatology and wisdom mysticism as we find it in the *Gospel of Thomas* and among the opponents of Paul in 1 Corinthians;²¹ Such belief has its social consequences; the regular bonds of patriarchal family structures and economic dependence were broken down in favor of freedom and equality. In this understanding, the followers of Jesus competed with other messages of nonpolitical and sometimes noneschatological views of salvation, for example, those propagated by Neopythagorean philosophers and Cynic preachers, or by Jewish mystics and apologists like Philo of Alexandria.

However, Jesus as a victim was also understood as a political message, in which the early Christian proclamation was confronting the political eschatology of the Roman imperial period, both in its pagan and Jewish forms. The components are explicitly eschatological and political, with all

²⁰ See my essay "The Divine Human Being," *HTR* 78 (1985) 243–52.

²¹ See my *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 55–62, 124–28.

their social, communal, and revolutionary implications. It is decisive that the core of the message of these Christian missionaries was the proclamation of a ruler of the new age who was the victim of the established authoritarian political order. Since this order was in turn based on an ideology of realized eschatology, it was impossible for Jesus' followers to ignore the realized eschatology of imperial Rome.

One could discuss the confrontation of early Christian communities with several variants of ancient Jewish eschatology and apocalyptic theology; however, the confrontation with the eschatology of Rome was decisive for the formation of the message of Jesus the victim. Indeed, the dying Jesus is explicitly confronted with the Roman order of realized eschatology in the inscription on his cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (John 19:9; cf. Mark 15:26 par.). His death was a political execution by Roman authorities — it must be remembered that only at a later time did the Christians assign the responsibility for Jesus' death to the Jewish authorities. The name Pontius Pilate remained the symbol for the confrontation with Rome and its political order. The proclamation of Jesus' vindication was as eschatological as Rome's ideology. It should be considered within the general framework of the Roman imperial propaganda of a realized eschatology.

IV. The Age of Augustus as Realized Eschatology

Hellenistic utopian concepts played an important role as early as the founding of Heliopolis by the slave Andronicus, when the last king of Pergamum gave his country to Rome by testament in 133 BCE. Also the slave insurrections of Eunus of Apamea (136–132 BCE) and Spartacus (73–71 BCE) seem to have been inspired by utopian revolutionary ideas. The strong influence of Hellenistic utopian concepts on the eschatology and organization of the Essenes has been demonstrated by Doron Mendels.²² To be sure, Jewish apocalypticism had its special roots and its special features. But, in the Roman imperial period, it was nevertheless part and parcel of the general eschatological spirit of the time²³ and it was even present in the spiritualized eschatology of Jewish Gnosticism that rejected the entire this-worldly reality as bondage to evil powers. Once Augustan Rome had adopted these eschatological and utopian ideals and domesticated them for its own purposes, every movement of liberation would naturally confront the state-sponsored realized eschatology of the Caesars.

Rome's political eschatology grew out of the announcement of doom that had come over the entire political and natural world:

²² D. Mendels, "Hellenistic Utopia and the Essenes," *HTR* 72 (1979) 207–22.

²³ See also the *Jewish Sibylline Oracles*; see J. J. Collins, "Sibylline Oracles," in *OTP* 1. 317–417. A significant collection of relevant essays was edited by David Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1979).

Already the second generation is destroyed in the civil war,
Rome falls into ruin through its own power.

With these words, Horace begins his *16th Epode*, written in the midst of the civil wars that ravaged Rome during the first century BCE. In the verses that follow, Horace calls for the emigration by ship over the high seas, like the boat people who fled from the horrors of Vietnam, for all those who still have a vision of a blessed future and who have the courage of hope. They will return only after a cosmic catastrophe and not until the establishment of a new paradise will signal the beginning of an eschatological restitution. The Appenine Mountains will plunge into the ocean, and then the paradise will come when the tiger mates with the deer and the falcon with the dove, when the earth grows fruit without the hurt of the plow and when honey flows from the bark of the oak.

Dieter Georgi has called attention to the prophetic eschatology of the Roman poets.²⁴ Indeed, from the time of Caesar to the false Neros of the time of Domitian, the Roman world was dominated by prophetic eschatology. It was an eschatology that was political, revolutionary, and saturated with the sense of doom and the expectation of paradise. The vision of paradise appears in Virgil's famous *Fourth Eclogue*.

Of themselves, untended, will the she goats then bring home their udders
swollen with milk, while flocks afield shall of the monstrous lion have no
fear. . . . No more shall mariner sail, nor pine-tree bark ply traffic on the
sea, but every land shall all things bear alike. . . . The sturdy ploughman
shall loose yoke from steer. . . .

Virgil adds two other elements to the eschatological vision: first, the birth of the divine child shall usher in "the last age by Cumae's Sibyl sung," "the child of gods, great progeny of Jove"; and second, the end-time will fulfill the promises and the righteousness of the primordial time—Virgil accomplished this vision in his great epic, the *Aeneid*, in which he connects the destiny of Rome to the mythic origins described in Homer's *Iliad*. Eduard Norden argued that these Roman eschatological expectations had their origins in the same Egyptian prophecies that also influenced Isaiah 9–11 and, in turn, Jewish and Christian eschatology.²⁵

Augustus was not only aware of these prophetic eschatological poems; he consciously announced his new order of peace as their fulfillment.

²⁴ D. Georgi, "Who is the True Prophet?" in *Christians among Jews and Gentiles: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (ed. George MacRae, George Nickelsberg, and Albert Sundberg; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 100–26.

²⁵ E. Norden, *Die Geburt des Kindes: Die Geschichte einer religiösen Idee* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1924; reprint: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958). Georgi suggests that Horace was directly influenced by Jewish missionary theology ("Who is the True Prophet?" 110).

Horace, two decades after the writing of his prophecies of doom, commissioned by Augustus to compose the festive ode²⁶ for the secular celebrations in the year 17 BCE, summarizes the themes of the prophecy in the form of a realized eschatology: the new age is beginning right now. The reference to Troy and to Aeneas indicates that the promises of the story of Rome's foundation are now fulfilled. Apollo (Phoebus) as the god of the new age is addressed in the very beginning and several times throughout the ode. Fruitfulness of the earth and fertility of the womb will characterize the new saeculum, as peace, honor, and respect have already begun to return.

The Ara Pacis, erected by Augustus in the year 9 BCE to commemorate the new age of peace, repeats in its sculpture the same eschatological topics. The most exquisitely executed relief sculptures show on the western side Aeneas sacrificing to the *penates publici*, the "Great Gods," whom he had brought from Samothrace to Rome; on the eastern side *Terra* is depicted, set in a paradisiac idyll.

Realized eschatology appears also in the inscriptions that record the introduction of the new Julian calendar. The following is a quotation from the inscription of Priene from the year 9 BCE:

Because providence that has ordered our life in a divine way . . . and since the Caesar through his appearance (*ἐπιφανείς*) has exceeded the hopes of all former good messages (*εὐαγγέλια*), surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good messages (*Ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τὴν δι' αὐτὸν* (sc. τὸν Σεβαστὸν) *εὐαγγελίων ἢ γενέθλιος ἡμέρα τοῦ θεοῦ*) [may it therefore be decided that . . .].²⁷

There are several characteristic features of this Roman imperial eschatology: (1) The new age is the fulfillment of prophecy, and it corresponds to the promises given in the primordial age. (2) The new age includes this earth as well as the world of the heavens: Apollo as Helios is the god of the new age; the zodiac sign of the month of Augustus's birth appears on the shields of the soldiers. (3) The new age is universal; it includes all nations: the new solar calendar is introduced by the vote of the people of the cities all over the empire. (4) There is an enactment of the new age through the official celebrations of the empire, like the secular festivities of the year 17 BCE, mirrored by the subsequent introduction of Caesarean games in many places. (5) The

²⁶ The *Carmen saeculare* (Hans Färber and Wilhelm Schöne, eds., *Horaz: Sämtliche Werke* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982]).

²⁷ For the entire Greek text of the inscription, see Wilhelm Dittenberger, *Oriens Graeci inscriptiones selectae* (2 vols.; Hildesheim: Olms, 1960) #458, vol. 2, pp. 48–60. The text quoted above is found in lines 40–42. The Greek text of the portion of the inscription quoted above is conveniently reprinted with a brief commentary in *Griechische Inschriften als Zeugnisse des privaten und öffentlichen Lebens* (ed. Gerhard Pfohl; Tusculum; Munich: Heimeran, n.d.) 134–35.

new age has a savior figure, the greatest benefactor of all times, the *divi filius*, usually translated into Greek as υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ — “Son of God” — the victorious Augustus.

V. Jesus and Eschatology

After Jesus' death, his followers had to answer the question, Who was this, whose cross had borne the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”? Their answer was unanimous: he was the victim of the world and the age, whose end he had announced. That he was proclaimed now as the one who was living, who had been raised from the dead, who was present in the power of the Spirit, does not simply mean that he was victorious after all. The mythical symbolism in which such beliefs about Jesus' vindication are described is a secondary question. It does not matter whether it was the pouring out of the Spirit, or the appearances of the living Jesus, or the witness of his resurrection, or the recognition that his words remained as a life-giving power—in every instance Jesus' followers believed that the new world and the new age had arrived, or could be obtained, through the one who was rejected, who suffered, who did not find a home in this world, and who had been put to death.

Therefore, the proclamation was thoroughly eschatological. It pointed to a future that was radically different from that promised by any of the ideologies and realities of which Jesus had become a victim. As a victim of this world and of its political powers, Jesus could not be resurrected, as it were, as a great human being, an insightful preacher, and an example of moral and religious virtues. The message—though founded in an actual event within human history, a real human life, and in words spoken by this human being—could no longer rely on the memory of the life, words, and deeds of a human individual, no matter how great and powerful. On the contrary, the portrait of the great human or even superhuman personality itself belonged to the world that had killed Jesus.

This proclamation has found its most radical expression in Paul, who insists that we no longer know Christ according to the flesh,²⁸ and for whom “imitation of Christ” is identical with becoming nothing oneself and everything for all people (see 1 Cor 10:32–11:1; Phil 3:17–19). Moreover, the Gospels of the NT make clear that discipleship, following after Jesus, is identical with taking one's cross and giving away one's life (Mark 8:34–38 par.).²⁹ Even in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus the Living One cannot be understood by his disciples as someone who is just like them. On the contrary, Jesus is always

²⁸ For the discussion of this paradoxical statement in 2 Cor 5:16, see Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

²⁹ The Gospel of Luke is the only exception; here Jesus indeed appears as an example of piety and, in his death, as the exemplary martyr.

beyond their grasp, part of a new world that the disciples want to measure with the yardstick of a world that has passed: "His disciples said to him, 'Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you.' He said to them, 'You have omitted the one living in your presence and have spoken (only) of the dead'" (*Gos. Thom.* 52)³⁰

But were the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth indeed eschatological? Or were the eschatological schemata of his early followers subsequently assigned to a Jesus whose original ministry and message did not contain any eschatological elements? That seems very unlikely. Within a year or two of Jesus' death, Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus because of their eschatological proclamation. That leaves precious little time in which the followers of a noneschatological Jesus could have developed an entirely new eschatological perspective without a precedent in the preaching and actions of Jesus.³¹ The problem is not whether Jesus of Nazareth preached an eschatological message. Rather, the difficulty arises from the fact that the shape and the details of Jesus' eschatology can be discerned only insofar as they are refracted in the eschatological imagery of Jesus' followers.³² What one finds in the relevant sources is a bewildering variety of traditional eschatologies, used as the framework for the Christian message, ranging from the Messiah, Wisdom/Sophia, and the coming Son of man to Temple ideology and to the Pauline proclamation of Jesus' resurrection as the turning point of the ages. How can one decide which of these refractions represents most legitimately what Jesus himself had preached?

That question cannot be answered by choosing one of these eschatologies and assigning it to the historical Jesus. The church had to respond to political and metaphysical systems based on ideologies of eschatological fulfillment. This response had to be given in the terms of whatever these ideologies proclaimed and could not simply be informed by whatever Jesus had said and done. After Jesus' death, continuity was no longer possible.

The coming of the new age through "Jesus the victim" implied a complete reversal of all political, social, and religious values that were held sacred and holy in the world of ancient Judaism as well as in the Roman system of realized eschatology. How did the reversal of traditionally accepted values, which became the very basis of the founding of communities of the new age

³⁰ Trans. Thomas O. Lambdin, in Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

³¹ Paul was called within not more than five years of Jesus' death, probably within two or three years, and he was called to proclaim an eschatological message that he had previously persecuted (Gal 1:13-16), namely, that the new age had begun with the resurrection of Jesus.

³² The only eschatological term that can be assigned to Jesus with certainty is "rule of God" (*βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ*); see esp. Luke (Q) 6:20; 13:28-29. Perhaps also the term "this moment" (*ὁ καιρὸς οὗτος*) belongs to the eschatological terms of Jesus; see Luke (Q) 12:54-56.

and the new world, correspond to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth?³³ If that correspondence cannot be established, “we may be,” as Käsemann warned, “superimposing the predicate ‘Christian’ on an understanding of existence and of the world, in which Jesus acts merely as occasioner and Christ merely as a mythological cipher.”³⁴ Were the new eschatological values proclaimed by the Christians true to the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth?

Critical historical inquiry may be able to establish that in the earliest tradition of Jesus’ sayings he himself proclaimed and lived such a reversal of values, that serving others rather than lording over them was the order of the rule of God,³⁵ that lending to those who cannot repay their loan was the way of the new age (Luke 6:34),³⁶ that loving one’s enemy was the only possible response to hostility (Luke [Q] 6:27–28), that people from all the nations of the world would be invited to the feast of the kingdom (Luke [Q] 13:28–29), and that those who had nothing to lose—the poor, those who were hungry, and those who weep—would inherit it (Luke [Q] 6:20–21). Perhaps there is a vision of the community of the new age, of the rule of God, in whatever fragments of Jesus’ preaching can be discerned. It is a vision that is eschatological, albeit often expressed in words that must be classified as wisdom sayings. It is a vision that reckons with God’s coming, a coming that begins to be realized in the community of those who dare to follow him. And it is a universalistic vision of a banquet in which privileges of status, wealth, and religious heritage are no longer relevant. But there is no guarantee that such sayings or the inaugural sermon of Q (Luke [Q] 6:27–49) represent the preaching of the historical Jesus. Moreover, it is interesting that sayings of highly charged mythical content are rarely assigned to this Jesus by modern interpreters. In any case, the fragmentary character of these texts, even if some sayings originate with the historical Jesus, does not permit the writing of the story of his life and message—not to speak of a “reconstruction” of the historical Jesus. Such an attempt only reveals once more the preoccupation with the search for the great human personality. It may bypass the real challenge that arises from early Christian texts, namely, to understand our world on the basis of criteria that have their origin in the proclamation of Jesus the victim. We have enough talk about great personalities of religious traditions. After Jesus died, his followers recognized that Jesus as a great human person would mean nothing, but that the kingdom of God had to be proclaimed as the utopia of a new community, a new political order, and indeed a new world.

³³ J. M. Robinson has demonstrated that Paul’s description of the experiences of the ministry of the apostles in 2 Corinthians may correspond very closely to the preaching of Jesus, although there is no direct reference to any “historical” words of Jesus (*A New Quest*, 124–25).

³⁴ Käsemann, “The ‘Jesus of History’ Controversy,” 44.

³⁵ Mark 10:42–44 may be an original saying of Jesus; however, Mark 10:45 (“the Son of man has come to give his life as a ransom for many”) must be assigned to the later community.

³⁶ If Jesus was a teacher of secular wisdom, this saying is an invitation to bankruptcy.