

JESUS THE REFORMER

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Scholars have searched high and low for the Historical Jesus. They have examined parallels in Jewish culture, Roman culture, Greek culture, and strangely, even in Indian culture. They have imagined Jesus to have been a wandering Cynic philosopher, a magician, a healer, a prophet, a priest (of sorts) and a political messiah whose failed mission saw him thrown under the grindstone of history and crushed to powder. These same scholars have offered detailed explanations for their perspectives, some of which have been convincing and others of which have simply been ridiculous. From Morton Smith's homosexual Jesus to Strauss's failed messianic pretender to the folk who actually insist that Jesus never even really lived; all have fallen on the hard rocks of widespread rejection.

Since we've not reached a consensus (and such does not even appear on the horizon), perhaps it's time to look in a different direction. Or better, in two directions at once: backward, to John the Baptist and forward to Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli. Of course I can already well imagine that hands are raised and brows are furrowed and scowls are forming at the mere suggestion. After all, Luther and Zwingli followed Jesus of Nazareth in historical sequence and surely cannot even *mutatis mutandis* be considered paradigmatic keys to interpreting his life. Or, can they? Certainly this "thinking out loud" may simply end in a dead end- like much of the other suggestions already mentioned. But perhaps our failure even to consider another direction has been the one stumbling block to progress in the Quest.

So, first, a brief glance backwards towards John the Baptist. The ministry of John has rightly been seen as “reformatory” (though that word has, so far as I know, not been used). That is, John’s ministry was an attempt to “re-form” Israel by calling on her to repent and return to the faith of their father Abraham. The concise recapitulation of John’s work is perfectly summarized in Mark 1, where we read

ιδου εγω αποστελλω τον αγγελον μου προ προσωπου σου ος κατασκευασει την οδον σου. φωνη βοωντος εν τη ερημω ετοιμασατε την οδον κυριου ευθειας ποιειτε τας τριβους αυτου.

John’s task is conceived and remembered as one of “preparation” and “calling to repentance”. That, in short, is how some early observers too conceived of Jesus’ mission..

An often missed clue is tucked away in the confession of Peter at Ceasarea (Mt 16), which most rightly take to be secondary to the historical Jesus and a statement of the Church post Easter. That is most certainly correct- yet at the very beginning of the confession story, when Jesus asks “who do people think the ‘Son of Man’ is, the disciples respond

οι δε ειπαν οι μεν ιωαννην τον βαπτιστην αλλοι δε ηλειαν ετεροι δε ιερεμιαν η ενα των προφητων.

The initial evaluation of Jesus by the crowd here reported, which I think is accurately reported by Matthew, is that he is “John the Baptist” or similar to John in that he calls to repentance and strives to re-form the genuine “people of God”. Famously, Matthew also tells us, in another place, that the mission of the disciples too, is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus does not wander outside of Israel and when approached by foreigners is, to put it politely, stand-offish. All of this demonstrates, I think, that Jesus of Nazareth, later Jesus the Christ, was concerned primarily with Israel

and then “the whole wide world”. Like John, Jesus’ mission was the purification of the people of God. These people are consistently called to repentance and renewal. They must return to God, like the prodigal son, and thereby live in fellowship and obedience “in their Father’s house”.

Now, looking forward for a moment, perhaps we can see where Jesus “fits” in the scheme of things. The purpose of the Reformation (under the leadership of Zwingli and Luther) was not the birth of a new movement, but the purification of the Church. That, and that precisely, was what both John the Baptist and Jesus were attempting. That, too, was what Paul understood to be going on when he insists that the true people of God are those who have faith in Christ. Jesus the Reformer: that is the correct and most helpful analogy for interpreting the life of the Historical Jesus. Such an approach answers more questions than it raises and has the advantage of reading the text simply and straightforwardly- leaving aside exegetical and theological gymnastics to make the preconception of Jesus fit in the scholars mold.

Perhaps, then, the best analogy for understanding the work of Jesus is to see him through the lens of this model. The lenses we have previously used have not served us well and need to be re-ground. Let the grinding commence along with the correcting.