

Interpreting Jesus

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More than two millennia ago, a young Jew named Jesus began wandering the villages of Galilee preaching about “the reign of God”. Some few of those who encountered him were open to receiving what he had to give. Some followed him as his disciples. At the heart of their discipleship was the relationship they had with him. This personal relationship with Jesus is what faith is. Those with the “eyes of faith” saw him in a different way, because it was as if he had saved them from all that weighed them down. In him they experienced “salvation”; like some life-saver plucking a helpless drowning bather from the surf, he plucked them from their state of helplessness. He changed their lives. Who is this person, they would keep asking, who can make such a difference? Surely only God can be doing this? From that first moment of encounter with Jesus, his followers began trying to make sense of him. Their faith relationship with him and their experience of salvation through him gave them a special perspective on who he was.

In this chapter we will be exploring that process of interpreting Jesus. It is a process that can be seen captured in the documents of the New Testament and in the creeds and statements of faith that emerge from the church councils of the first seven centuries. It is a process that continued down through history until today. We too are involved in the process of interpreting Jesus – if we are one of those people who are willing to get caught up in the mystery of this Jesus of Nazareth and want to pass on to others what we have received through him.

With the Eyes of Faith and the Help of Historians

The first thing we need to note is that what we have in the New Testament are faith interpretations of Jesus. It could not be any other way. Faith gives an insider’s view of things. Because faith is fundamentally a personal relationship with God through Jesus, it provides a particular perspective on him. The insider is a witness to reality in a way an outsider can never be. Those first people who believed in Jesus because of how he changed them were able to witness to him with the knowledge that faith gives. The four Gospels of the New Testament provide such a witness to Jesus.

There was time when biblical scholars were duped into thinking that because the Gospels are faith interpretations, then this diminishes their capacity to be regarded as historical records. Certainly the Gospels are not historical records like some 60 Minutes in-depth documentary. Well, media-savvy viewers know that such reporting has its own bias as well. The writing of history too is the narration of events *from a particular perspective*. There is no such thing as a “pure experience” or neutral account or interpretation of any event or a person.

The faith interpretations of the Gospels are a primary source for understanding Jesus. But there is a secondary source which is helpful in reconstructing the way the first followers

of Jesus would have interpreted and understood him. That is the discipline of what is called “historical Jesus research”. Here, historians attempt to reconstruct the life and times of Jesus. Some theologians would want to disregard historical Jesus research altogether, and look only to the Gospels as a source for understanding Jesus. And there are some historical Jesus researchers who think they have a better insight into who Jesus was than the Gospel writers. Both approaches go too far. Theology well benefits from historians’ attempts to place Jesus in his historical context. But theology also sees the unique significance of the Gospels for providing faith-interpretations of Jesus by people who were living around that time. The insider knowledge of faith is not to be easily dismissed. Our approach will be to use the insights of historians to better understand the faith interpretation process which we find in the Gospels.

Categories for Interpreting Jesus

When we examine the faith interpretations of Jesus captured in the four Gospels and other writings of the New Testament, we do not find one single faith interpretation of him. There is a wide range of ways of describing the salvation that he brought them and for describing who he was. One reason for this diversity is that the Jewish people of that time had a wide range of expectations as to how God would come to save them and who the mediator of God’s salvation would be. Let us now examine some of those expectations and how they could have provided frameworks for interpreting and making sense of Jesus. We will see that, although there were many categories available for interpreting who Jesus was, no one category seemed to capture the uniqueness of this young Jew from Nazareth.

In the past history, writings and living memory of the Jewish people of Jesus’ time, there were many figures who would have been “models” for understanding Jesus. Some of these were real historical figures; others were “mythical” figures. The great kings of Israel and Judah, like David, were often seen to be agents of God, anointed for the purpose of leading the people. So there were, in Jesus’ time, expectations that the true monarchy would be restored and that one would come, sent by God, who would be the new anointed king, the Royal Messiah. Another significant group in Jewish history were the high priests, anointed by God. Could Jesus be in the line of these? Then there were the prophets of old, particularly the great prophet Moses and the twin team of prophets Elijah and Elisha. One line of expectation focused on the sending by God of a prophet like Moses; another looked for the return of the healing prophet Elijah. But there was further diversity of expectation: would the new prophet usher in the final times when history would end and God’s purposes be fulfilled (the “eschatological prophet”); would this present world come to an end, or would it be transformed into something new but the same?

Current scholarship into the Jewish world of Jesus’ day (Second Temple Judaism, it is often called) shows a society with vast diversity in its spiritualities and religious expectations. But, for our purposes, we do not need to know all the details of such expectations, only to understand something of the dynamic that would have been at work as the first followers of Jesus attempted to make sense of him in the light of all these expectations.

What is apparent is that, although Jesus didn't seem to fit just one single category, he certainly fitted some. Based on the predominant features of Jesus' ministry, as depicted in the four Gospel interpretations of him and as retrieved by historians examining the evidence, it seems that a few categories would have been immediately applicable: prophet, sage and teacher, and healer. Jewish history had had plenty of each of those. Rather than focusing on the many titles which the New Testament gives to Jesus, perhaps it will be more helpful for us to focus on these categories which name particular aspects of Jesus' activity. The many titles which the early Christians would later give to Jesus emerge out of these four dimensions of his ministry.

Prophet

The first category is that of prophet. Like the prophets of old, Jesus had a passion for alleviating the suffering of people and for criticising those who were the cause of such suffering. Like the prophets of old, Jesus believed that God would eventually reign over the forces that bring such degradation to human lives. His catch-all phrase for that hope was what he called the reign of God. The story of faith of the Jewish people was that God, who from the moment of creation had reigned over the chaos, continued to call the chosen people to be faithful to the covenant and promised them that he would eventually achieve victory over all that opposes God and God's purposes. Jesus the prophet continued to preach that promise, and to call to account people who opposed God's reign. Within the social and religious context of his day, he prophetically crossed over the invisible boundaries in society separating clean from unclean, insider from outsider, righteous from sinner. He ate with sinners and included in his friendship those marginalised from "good society". In this way he set out to embody the loving compassion of the God who was coming to reign through him. It seems that those around him certainly interpreted him as one like the prophets of old. But they also sensed that Jesus was something more than a prophet. Later generations of Christians would see this prophet sent by God not simply as a representative of God, but as Emmanuel, God with them, God's love and compassion incarnate. Indeed, they would speak of him as God's Son. Christians would come to affirm of the God revealed in Jesus: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8).

Wisdom Teacher

The second category was wisdom teacher. The format of Jesus' teaching was basically in two modes, aphorisms and parables. Both were forms of teaching traditionally used by "sages" or wisdom teachers. The Old Testament, the Bible Jesus knew, and other literature known at the time, had many examples of such wisdom literature. Jesus certainly fitted into the category of such a teacher of divine wisdom. But, unlike some of the conventional wisdom of a lot of that literature, Jesus' wisdom had a sharper edge. He set out to subvert the conventional wisdom of his day and to offer his hearers an alternative wisdom. In a world where God reigns and God's wisdom rules, the last are first and the first last; a king rides triumphantly on a donkey; an unimportant child is deemed the most important; money is dangerous and success is determined by one's capacity to see things as Jesus sees. In such teaching, Jesus went around preaching the reign of God in word. In calling them to account and in challenging them to take the

opportunity to be part of God's reign, he called people to faith. Although he never "preached himself" and was utterly focussed on the God whom he addressed as Abba, it seems that those who received his message were drawn into a relationship with the teacher of the message. He seemed to embody the words that he preached. The early Christians would later come to speak of him as divine wisdom incarnate. Jesus was saviour to them in the way his enlightenment not only showed them the path to life but also enabled them to live it.

Healer

The third category is that Jesus was a healer and doer of extraordinary deeds. That Jesus healed emerges strongly in the memory of the early Christians captured in the Gospels. But he was not unique in being recognised as someone who could effect extraordinary change in people. There is evidence of other healers around in the first century. But, in Jesus' case, his healings and extraordinary deeds were integral to his proclamation of the reign of God and demonstrated God's will for human beings. The church's memory of Jesus, as captured in the four Gospels, shows his healing activity as a display of the compassionate care of God, working through him. Jesus was saviour to them in the healing he effected.

From these characteristic features of Jesus' ministry, the later Gospel narratives would give many titles to Jesus, titles which were part of the great diversity of expectations at the time, but all of which seemed applicable to Jesus in some way: Messiah (Christ), Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Son of David, Emmanuel, the Servant of God, Word of God. Rather than examining each of these in particular, it will be more useful to examine the development of interpretation of Jesus in the sixty years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The experience of Jesus as alive after the resurrection became new data in this process of interpretation. But it is inaccurate to use distinctions like "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith", if we mean by them that the process of interpreting Jesus from a faith perspective only began after the resurrection. The diverse christologies we find in the New Testament are all the result of an interpretation process which began before the resurrection. However, this is not to say that the process didn't continue after the resurrection, and in the light of the "new information" concerning Jesus' identity that the resurrection provided.

The Development of New Testament Christologies

A helpful way of summarising both the development and diversity of New Testament christologies is a framework outlined by the scripture scholar Raymond Brown.¹ In writing of the "development" of New Testament christology, Brown emphasises that development is rarely linear. But his generalisation is helpful. He notes that this development of reflection on Jesus' identity after the resurrection follows a particular pattern: the early New Testament writings (e.g., St Paul writing in the late 40s of the first century) give significance to the later aspects of Jesus' "career" (when he will come again at the end of time), and the later New Testament writings (e.g., John's Gospel written probably in the last decade of the first century) give significance to the earliest aspects of

¹ See Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

Jesus' career (his pre-existence). Brown's framework will help us to understand each of the titles mentioned above in a new light. He notes six christologies, each of which focuses on a particular "moment" in what he calls Jesus' "career".

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Second-Coming Christology

The earliest christology, Brown notes, is what he calls Second-Coming Christology. The moment focused on here is that time when Jesus will come again at the parousia, the end of time (the *eschaton*). Hence this christology has a very strong eschatological emphasis, i.e., it is focussed on the future. To get the flavour of this christology all you need to do is read St Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians. There is an urgency here; Jesus is coming again very soon. He is the One Who is Soon to Come Again. However, this sense of urgency seems to have faded within a few short years, with the early Christians realising that they would be in this church business for the long haul. The belief that Jesus would come again continued to be an element of Christian thinking, but would be balanced by other christologies.

Resurrection Christology

The second christology that then emerges is Resurrection Christology, focusing on God's raising Jesus from the dead. Who is Jesus? He is the Crucified and Risen One. He lives and is with us now! We see this shift in the writings of St Paul, who, within a few years has moved away from his eschatological emphasis and highlights the living presence of the Risen One in the community of disciples who are "in Christ" and who are indeed the Body of Christ. Here Brown speaks of a "two-step christology": Jesus is depicted as being "raised" from a state of lowliness of a more exalted state through the resurrection. Just read through St Paul's hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 and you will get the idea. God raises Jesus up and gives him that name above all other names: Lord! Also, read the first line of Psalm 110, and you will get an idea of how the early Christians were helped by the Old Testament (the Jewish bible) in making sense of Jesus: "The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand'". (Ps 110:1) At the resurrection Jesus was exalted to the position of importance, seated at God's right hand.

Ministry Christology

The third christology that then emerges is Ministry Christology. This shift is generated by a question that logically would have been arising in the mind of the Christian community as it continued its reflection on the question: Who is this Jesus? If he was "Lord" at the time of his resurrection, what of his identity and relationship to God before his death and resurrection? So we find the writers of the Gospels answering that question by affirming that, yes, he was Lord as he was going about his ministry. Matthew and Luke especially show this shift. For example, Luke has Martha saying to Jesus: "'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?' . . . But the Lord answered her" (Lk 10:40-41). However, as we noted before, this development is not exactly linear. There remains in the Gospels a tension between exalted ways of portraying Jesus and ways that depict him in a lowly state. A significant way in which the early Christians attempted to make sense of Jesus' horrific death and the apparent failure of his mission

was a collection of psalms from the book of Isaiah about God's suffering servant. The Gospels, in re-telling the story of Jesus, retain this image of Jesus as the one who will be shamefully degraded for the cause of God. Mark's Gospel, written a decade or so before Matthew and Luke, in particular paints a portrait of Jesus' as God's lowly servant. Mark also preserves the memory of a Jesus who does not know everything and who is even addressed somewhat irreverently by his disciples.

On the other hand, Matthew and Luke, who use big chunks of Mark's Gospel in their own narratives, weed out such references and overall paint more exalted portraits of Jesus as he goes about his ministry. By the end of the first century, when we come to John's Gospel, we see this process extended even further, with the previous tension between a lowly and an exalted Jesus eliminated altogether. From the very first, at Cana in Galilee, the "glory" of the Johannine Jesus is highlighted. The disciples use exalted titles of Jesus and Jesus makes exalted claims for himself. John's Jesus knows no limitations and faces his death as a moment of glory.

Childhood Christology

By this stage you would recognise the peculiar backwards pattern that Brown highlights: as the early Christians keep reflecting on the identity of Jesus, they keep "pushing back" the logic of their questioning: If Jesus was Lord as he went about his public ministry, what about when he was a child? And so we come to the next phase of development, Childhood Christology. Both Matthew and Luke have narratives at the start of their gospels which imagine the childhood of Jesus. All the Gospels depict the baptism of Jesus as a moment of christological importance, but Matthew and Luke push it back even further. All you need do is read through Luke's depiction of the knowledgeable child Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:49-51) to get the flavour of this phase. Even Jesus as a child is special, with a special knowledge of and a special relationship with God. To see how restrained Matthew and Luke are in depicting Jesus' specialness, all you need do is read through another depiction of Jesus' childhood (not in the church's New Testament), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

Conception Christology

The next phase of this development is what Brown calls Conception Christology, also found in Matthew and Luke. From the moment of conception, Jesus is named as Holy One, Emmanuel, Son of God. The divine specialness of Jesus is highlighted by his not being conceived from a human father, but through God's Holy Spirit. The final stage of this development is Pre-existence Christology, when the questioning continues: can we speak of Jesus' having an identity before his conception? There are a few stages within this development. Even Paul has a form of pre-existence christology, but speaks of Christ as a type of Abraham, of Moses, and even further back, of Adam (see, e.g., 1 Cor 10:4). Paul even speaks of a creational pre-existence of Christ (1 Cor 8:6 and Col 1:15-20). This creational pre-existence gets its clearest formulation in the Prologue of John's Gospel. Applying the Jewish notion of Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek) as being with God as a helper at the time of creation (e.g. Proverbs 8), but changing *Sophia* to *Logos* (Word), John's Prologue states that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Is this stating that Jesus existed eternally with God? Brown states

that there is no New Testament passages that affirms the eternal pre-existence of the Word; the earliest christological moment is Christ's "creational pre-existence".

Logos / Sophia Christology

It would not be for another two centuries or so, around 318, when an effective preacher from Alexandria in northern Africa, Arius, would force the church to clarify the question he was raising: what of the eternal pre-existence of the Logos? A successful hymn writer, Arius had his congregation singing: "There was a time when the Son was not". His success forced a meeting of 318 bishops of the Christian churches to clarify the church's belief on the matter. The creed of the Council of Nicaea in 325 affirmed that the Son is "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) as God the Father, thereby affirming the equality of the Son with God the Father and affirming the eternal pre-existence of the Son. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. To encounter Jesus Christ is to encounter the God whom he proclaimed. Jesus Christ is *Sophia/Logos* embodied.

The church would continue to state its belief in Jesus as the centuries would roll on. New questions would emerge. What of Jesus' relationship to the Holy Spirit whom Jesus believed had empowered him? Is the Holy Spirit "truly God", as the Son is? In 381, the bishops of the church met again for the Council of Constantinople to affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity was reaching its final formulation. The God of Jesus Christ is a communion of three persons in one God. Space does not permit an examination of the details of these debates, but for our purposes, it is enough to have examined the process of interpreting Jesus which emerged in the early church. It is a process that continues to this day.

Interpreting Jesus for Australia

We have seen that the early Christians experienced and interpreted Jesus in a diversity of ways, in the light of their experience of salvation from God through him and of their faith relationship with him. We Australians of the 21st century are in not much different a situation as those first Christians. Well, no different in the sense that the process of interpretation is the same, despite the fact that the categories and cultural context of their reflection on Jesus is very different from ours.

When we examine the distinctive narratives of the four gospel writers, we see that each of the evangelists brought to the fore and highlighted aspects of the Jesus tradition that they felt needed emphasising for their particular communities. Luke, for example, has more stories and sayings of Jesus related to money and the sharing of possessions. Luke, seemingly within a community where this is a particular problem for the living of the Christian life in all its integrity, selects and brings to the fore those stories and sayings of Jesus that he believes his community needs to hear again in all their sharpness.

So too we Christians today must speak of Jesus in ways that highlight the challenge Jesus brings to our particular context and to present Jesus in a way that shows him to be the saviour who can enable us to face those challenges. For example, in Australia today, what is it in our context that needs saving? What would salvation be for us, for me? Who needs

saving? What is contrary to the reign of God in our Australian society and across the current political landscape? Re-reading the Gospels in the light of these questions will allow us to re-tell the Gospel (the Good News of/about Jesus) in a way that will give answers to those questions. We read the present through the lens of the past, and we read the past in the light of the present. In this way we will speak meaningfully about Jesus Christ in a way that makes him relevant to today's issues and proclaims him as God's saviour for us.

So let us examine some elements of our current situation and propose some ways of re-reading the Gospels in the light of that situation. We will see that, like the evangelists, we must select and bring to the foreground aspects of the Jesus tradition that need highlighting for our contemporary proclamation of the Gospel. Space does not permit a detailed and comprehensive examination of Australian life and culture at the beginning of the 21st century. But certain elements could be proposed. After the events of September 11 and the Bali bombing, some Australians are not resisting the temptation to vilify Moslems and to be suspicious of all strangers and foreigners. A vision of Australia as a multi-cultural society, where people of diverse ethnic origins and religious commitments can live in harmony, is far from being the commonly-agreed identity for Australia as a nation. Reconciliation with our indigenous peoples and the ability to apologise for "the stolen generations" is still far from becoming a reality. The detention of asylum seekers and their children is considered acceptable to some, despite international conventions.

Such issues raise the question: what kind of nation do we want to be? For Australian Christians, the question becomes: what kind of nation would God want us to be? Trying to work out what God would desire must always start from re-interpreting Jesus Christ, for we Christians believe that it is in Jesus Christ that we find God revealed. So, to interpret Jesus for Australia, we begin with the context within which we live, and from that perspective, we re-read the Gospels.

Let's just focus only on the issue of immigration policy and attitudes to asylum seekers. In the light of that issue, what would we select and bring to the fore in our re-telling of the Jesus story for Australians? With that issue as a lens, how would we re-focus the Gospel story? Surely such a re-interpretation of Jesus would highlight the open hospitality that Jesus extends to people who are outcasts in the society of his time. He is interpreted in faith as God visiting his people. Jesus is the divine guest seeking hospitality. To believe in Jesus is to offer welcoming hospitality to the divine visitor. Jesus embodies and models the hospitality we should offer to him. Jesus offers hospitality through his healings, where he declares clean those whom society would define as impure. But the hospitality theme is most evident in the meal motif throughout the Gospels. Jesus seems to have had a house where he acts as host and receives visitors. He is also host to the crowds in the loaves and fish scenes. He accepts hospitality in the homes of people like Zacchaeus and Simon the Pharisee (Lk 19:1-10; 10:36-50). And finally, at the last of many suppers with his disciples, he gives them the eucharistic meal as *the* way of remembering him and of being with him. Do this in memory of me. It was the most characteristic activity of his ministry: giving and receiving hospitality. On the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:28), it is only when the two disciples offer hospitality to the

stranger that they recognise him as Christ with them, recalling the ecclesial memory recorded in another gospel, Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35).

A number of themes cluster around this way of re-reading the Jesus story and its relevance to Australia today: receptivity, reciprocity, responsiveness, reciprocity, openness, welcome, reception, hospitality, stranger, guest, host, pilgrim, pilgrimage, home, homelessness, return and rest. If the reign of God is to be promoted by Christians in Australia today, it would require creating a political and social climate where the stranger is valued and received as a sacred guest, for "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Wouldn't that be the ultimate paradox: to encounter Christ in the refugee Muslim! If Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed as God's Saviour for us in our current context, it would be as the one who can liberate us from our fear of the stranger, the one who can teach us the graciousness of a hospitality where the reign of God becomes a reality.

Interpreting Jesus is a continual task for Christians. We have seen in this chapter how those early followers of Jesus made sense of their saving encounter with him in the light of the context in which they lived and by means of the familiar categories of their culture and society. We have examined the process of how their faith in him developed, until it found expression in the central belief of Christianity: that in Jesus Christ, God has visited his people. We profess that to encounter Jesus Christ is to encounter God fully. In him we have touched and been touched by the loving compassion of God who desires the fullest well-being of human beings. It is the task of those who receive him to tell others of what he can mean for them. But to do that effectively requires that we re-interpret Jesus in a way that will make them want to welcome him, the Divine Guest among us.

Further Reading

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<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/gehall/XTOLOGY.htm>

_____. *How Do We Interpret the Parables and Miracles of Jesus?*

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Frontline: From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>

Theology Library: Jesus Christ—Head of the Church. Site compiled by Jerry Darling of Spring Hill College provides multiple useful links.

<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/jesus.htm>