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Jesus the Servant King: A Lecture Series on My Version of the Historical Jesus [Lecture Notes]

Scott Gambrill Sinclair (Retired)

(Retired) Dominican University of California, scottgsinclair329@gmail.com

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Jesus the Servant King: A Lecture Series on My Version of the Historical Jesus

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair



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My Methodology to Reconstruct the Historical Jesus in Comparison with That of Other Scholars

I. There are numerous scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus, and these differ greatly.

II. This diversity is due to many things:

- A. The continuing desire of scholars to make Jesus relevant to their own social context.
- B. The impulse to make Jesus like the scholar in question.
- C. The desire of orthodox Christians to imagine a Jesus who supports subsequent orthodox dogma and the church institutions which teach it.
- D. The contrasting desire of heterodox scholars to imagine a Jesus who undermines orthodox dogma and church institutions.
- E. The limitations of the available historical sources.
 - 1. All sources were written at least decades after Jesus's crucifixion.
 - 2. Almost all sources are Christian and look back at Jesus through the lens of the resurrection and the development of Christianity.
 - 3. The sources sometimes conflict with one another (e.g., the genealogies in Matthew and Luke differ after David [Matt. 1:1-1:17, Luke 3:23-38]).
 - 4. The sources contain obvious historical errors (e.g., the census in Luke 2:1-2 took place long after the birth of Jesus rather than being the cause of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem).
 - 5. Much of what is in the gospels is literary rather than historical. For example, in Mark's Gospel Jesus's repeated predictions of his resurrection (Mark 8:31, 9:9, 9:31, 10:33-34) are literary foreshadowing to prepare the reader for the startling end of the narrative. If the historical Jesus had kept predicting his resurrection, the disorientation of the disciples at the discovery of the empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8) would be inexplicable.
 - 6. The gospels do not always present incidents in chronological order.
 - a. The gospels often have blocks of material on a single topic (miracle stories, disputes between Jesus and his critics, parables of the kingdom).
 - b. Sometimes the evangelists arrange material to develop a theological theme. For example, John's Gospel moves the protest at the Temple from the end of Jesus's ministry to the beginning in order to produce a long section which emphasizes that Jesus's own body and the Church's sacraments replace the Temple (John 2:13-6:59).
- F. Scholars make different assumptions about the supernatural.
 - 1. Skeptical scholars assume that the alleged miracles of Jesus must have a natural explanation.
 - 2. Credulous scholars accept the possibility of a supernatural explanation.
- G. Scholars have different methodologies for separating authentic historical material in the gospels from inauthentic.
 - 1. Skeptical scholars rely heavily on the criteria of dissimilarity and embarrassment.

- a. These scholars assume that, since much of the material in the gospels seems due to literary artistry (e.g., the canticles in Luke 1-2) and reflects things that happened after Jesus's death (the resurrection, the persecution of the early church, the destruction of the Temple, the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, belief in the divinity of Christ), we should be suspicious over whether something which the gospels claim goes back to Jesus actually does.
 - b. To establish a reliable core that must go back to him, skeptical scholars begin by isolating material that conflicts with subsequent church belief and practice.
 - c. Then these scholars cautiously accept as authentic additional material that coheres with the established core.
2. By contrast, other scholars accept that basically what the gospels record is historically authentic and only question material for which there is strong evidence for inauthenticity. For example, Matthew 17:24-27 is obviously a fable to justify paying the temple tax which the Romans made mandatory and confiscated after the Temple's destruction.

III. My own perspective.

- A. I acknowledge my desire to make the historical Jesus compatible with orthodox Christianity and with the insights of other world religions.
- B. I also acknowledge my desire to make the historical Jesus relevant to the social situation in 2020. At present, the world is beset with fascism and ecological peril but also blessed with new possibilities for women, non-heterosexuals, indigenous peoples, and other long oppressed groups. At various points in these lectures, I will suggest how Jesus is relevant.
- C. For both historical and dogmatic reasons, I believe that Jesus was fully human with all the mental and spiritual limitations which humanity entails. *Therefore, his life must be understandable as a human response to his historical situation.*
- D. However, I do not rule out the possibility that God sometimes did miracles, especially if there is solid historical evidence for the miracle in question. Miracles still occur today (on one occasion, in my presence).
- E. I agree that gospel material that is dissimilar to what Christians later taught or was embarrassing to them is historically authentic.
- F. However, overemphasizing this indisputable core will lead to the loss of the thrust of what Jesus said and did if the Church remembered that thrust.
- G. Therefore, I begin with the methodological assumption that what the synoptic gospels record is basically historically authentic, and I believe that the evidence supports this assumption.
 1. The fact that the synoptics even contain material that was dissimilar to what the early church taught or embarrassing suggests that much of what is in these gospels must be historically authentic.
 2. The use of material to address subsequent matters or to accomplish literary goals does not in itself prove inauthenticity but only the possibility of it.
 3. Even material that is clearly inauthentic may still reflect an accurate remembrance of at least the sort of thing that Jesus taught or did. For

- example, Matthew 17:24-27, mentioned above, coheres with Jesus's teaching that it was lawful to pay taxes to the Romans (Mark 12:14-17).
- H. Although the Gospel of John is by its own admission a reflection on the significance of Jesus as the incarnation of God, numerous details in this gospel are historically authentic, as many scholars now recognize.
- I. Since the early church began with Jesus and subsequently remembered and honored him, what the early church believed and did is at least weak evidence for what Jesus believed and did.
- J. Very skeptical scholarship (e.g., that of Rudolf Bultmann or the Jesus Seminar) that excludes almost everything in the gospels as inauthentic should not on the basis of so little remaining material produce a picture of Jesus which conflicts with what the synoptics basically portray and the early church remembered. Instead, such scholarship should conclude that we cannot know much about Jesus.
- K. Because of the problems noted above, all I claim about my reconstruction of the historical Jesus is that it is more probable than the alternatives.
- L. I invite those who disagree to see this portrait of Jesus as my attempt to emphasize those aspects of his life and teaching that are most relevant today.

My Basic Theses: In the Following Lectures I will Primarily Argue for Three Points, Two of Them Highly Controversial.

- I. Contrary to contemporary mainstream biblical scholarship, Jesus did not expect that God would soon intervene apocalyptically. Instead, Jesus hoped to change the world gradually through normal human activity.
- II. Contrary to all biblical scholarship known to me, Jesus pursued a plan to become an earthly king under the Roman Empire.
- III. Jesus intended to be a servant king.

The Social and Political Setting of Jesus

- I. Jesus lived from around 5 BCE until around 30 CE.
 - A. He certainly died when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (26-36 CE).
 - B. An earlier date in Pilate's tenure is more probable, since Luke tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry around 28 CE (Luke 3:1), and apparently Jesus's own ministry lasted no more than two or three years.
 - C. The gospels record that he was born before the death of Herod the Great (probably 4 BCE; Matt. 2:1, Luke 1:5).
 - D. Luke states that Jesus was about thirty when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23).
- II. Jesus lived primarily in Galilee but made short visits to surrounding territories and, especially, to Jerusalem.
 - A. As his full name, "Jesus of Nazareth," implies, he grew up in Nazareth, an obscure village in Galilee about three miles from the ancient city of Sepphoris.
 - B. During his ministry he spent much time in the towns on the Lake of Galilee and also briefly visited areas bordering Galilee (Mark 5:1-20, 7:24-31, 8:27).
 - C. John's Gospel plausibly tells us that during his ministry Jesus visited Jerusalem repeatedly to observe the pilgrimage feasts (2:13, 5:1, 7:1-10, 12:1) and, if John is correct, Jesus would repeatedly have had to pass through either Samaria (John 4:1-42, cf. Luke 17:11) or Perea to get there.
 1. Since all but the last of these visits to Jerusalem do not appear in the synoptics, they are not historically certain.
 2. Nevertheless, I believe that they are likely.
 - a. Theoretically, these pilgrimages were required for Jewish males (Deut. 16:1-17), and Jesus was devout.
 - b. These trips would have been brief, and the synoptic evangelists may have considered them unimportant or not known about them.
 - D. Of course, at the end of his life Jesus travelled to Jerusalem where he was executed.
- III. Throughout these areas there was a stark contrast between a small, wealthy elite, and a huge mass of poor, many of them desperately so.
 - A. A tiny percentage of the population owned most of the material property and many slaves.

- B. The middle class (i.e., people whose resources comfortably exceeded bare necessities) was small and included merchants, managers, military officers, well-off peasants and their families.
 - C. The vast majority of people (including craftsmen, hired hands, petty vendors, toll takers, common soldiers, servants, landless peasants, and their dependents) lived at subsistence and was very vulnerable in times of famine, war, or plague.
 - D. A significant portion of the population eked out a precarious and degrading existence as beggars, prostitutes, and outlaws.
- IV. The desperate economic situation of so many would lead to unrest under special conditions, but usually these people accepted their plight as the “normal.”
- V. During the lifetime of Jesus both Galilee and Judea were parts of the Roman Empire, but their political situations were very different from a Jewish perspective.
- A. The Roman Empire ruled Judea directly with a heavy hand, and Jews were discontented.
 - 1. In 6 CE the Romans deposed the Jewish ruler of Judea and placed the area directly under a Roman governor, and this system of rule continued without interruption until after the death of Jesus.
 - 2. Consequently, the signs of Roman presence were obvious, including Roman troops, tax collectors, and military fortresses.
 - 3. A continuing source of tension between the Romans and Jews was the Roman use of Pagan images, including on coins.
 - 4. Consequently, there was widespread resentment among the Jewish populace.
 - 5. This resentment forced the Roman government to be repressive. Josephus and Luke record that Pontius Pilate was responsible for massacres (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII; Luke 13:1).
 - B. By contrast, during the same period the Roman government ruled Galilee indirectly through the (nominally?) Jewish ruler Herod Antipas, and Jews there had little nationalistic reason to be unhappy.
 - 1. Although Herod Antipas was a Roman appointee and payed tribute, he managed to maintain the appearance of autonomy and respected Jewish sensibilities.
 - a. He had his own army and tax collectors.
 - b. He also minted his own bronze coins.
 - c. Out of respect for Jewish concerns, these coins had no forbidden images.
 - 2. Except for the execution of John the Baptist whose popularity seemed threatening, Herod ruled more leniently than the Roman governors in the South, because his Jewish subjects were less resentful.
- VI. Today we have little surviving evidence for how Judaism in Galilee differed from the various Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes) and movements (popular prophets, messiahs, and armed revolutionaries) in the South. Except for the gospels, the written sources on which we depend for knowledge of first-century Judaism seldom mention Galilee during the lifetime of Jesus.
- VII. But I would guess that in Galilee Judaism was simpler and more traditional and was largely unaware of and/or unconcerned about recent developments in Judea.

- A. Jews in Judea regarded religion in Galilee as backward and unworthy of much attention, though the Pharisees, who were eager to spread their influence, did visit. The following quote captures the prejudice well, “No prophet will arise from Galilee” (John 7:52).
- B. Galilee was separated from Judea by Samaria.
- C. Consequently, I assume that at least most of Galilee (and, especially, villages like Nazareth) had little awareness of religious developments in Judea, such as apocalyptic speculation among scribes there.
- D. Instead, Judaism in Galilee focused on the traditional basics, on the literal meaning of the Pentateuch and the Prophets and the Psalms and on keeping the fundamentals of Mosaic Law.
- E. To enforce compliance with distinctive Jewish practices, the religious system relied on shaming.
1. There were formal penalties (fines, flogging, execution) for violating what we would call criminal law.
 2. But the specific ethnic regulations of the Mosaic Law were not enforced by formal punishment but public censure. People who did not abide by the food and purity and Sabbath laws were regarded as unclean and shunned.
 3. The censure fell on both those Jews who had no desire to keep the regulations and on those who wanted to but lacked the time and money for the holidays and fees (especially, the temple tax) that the law required.
- F. Theoretically, Galilean Jews believed the biblical promises that a Son of David would usher in a Golden Age of justice and prosperity.
- G. But at least during normal times, there was no reason to assume that these promises would be fulfilled soon.
1. Centuries had passed since the ancient prophecies, and people were used to waiting.
 2. Galilee already had a Jewish ruler who by ancient standards was fairly good, and imminent fulfillment was not urgent. The apocalyptic fervor that appears in Daniel or Paul’s letters was a product of conditions (religious oppression, enthusiasm after the resurrection) that did not exist under Herod Antipas.
- H. Through the influence of visiting Pharisees, most Jews in Galilee probably believed that sometime after the Messianic Age there would be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment. There is not enough evidence to determine whether Galileans believed in some interim life after death between an individual’s demise and the general resurrection.
- I. Since the Maccabees conquered Galilee and allowed Jews to immigrate there from the South, I suspect that the Maccabean martyrs and military heroes were celebrated in popular culture (cf. European immigrants to the United States celebrating Columbus Day).
- J. Such was the Judaism which molded Jesus.

The Life of Jesus until the Ministry of John the Baptist

I. The gospels give us little information about Jesus's life prior to his baptism, and most of this little is not historically reliable.

- A. Matthew and Luke give us brief stories of Jesus's birth and childhood.
- B. However, since Matthew and Luke wrote no earlier than 80 CE, almost a century or more had passed since the purported events.
- C. This long gap by itself raises questions about historical accuracy.
- D. The goals of these accounts of Jesus's early life are theological, not historical.

The accounts emphasize the theological claims that Jesus was

- 1. The Son of God, begotten by the Holy Spirit and a virgin.
- 2. The legitimate king of Israel, since he was a descendant of David and attested as Messiah by reliable witnesses (angels, prophets, contemporary saints, even Wise Men from the East and a star).

E. Matthew and Luke mostly contradict one another on historical matters.

- 1. Matthew's account of Jesus's birth and early childhood assumes that Jesus's parents initially lived in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and only moved to Egypt and then Nazareth to escape him being murdered.
- 2. By contrast, Luke's account of the same years assumes that Jesus's parents initially lived in Nazareth and only temporarily visited Bethlehem where they registered for the census and Jesus was born.

F. Most of what Matthew and Luke record about Jesus's birth and infancy originated from sources other than accurate historical memory.

- 1. Matthew's account is primarily based on material from the Hebrew Bible.
 - a. Jesus fulfills numerous biblical prophecies (Matt. 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18).
 - b. His life has major parallels with Moses's. For example, in his infancy Jesus like Moses was in danger of being killed due to an evil ruler.
 - c. Therefore, it appears that Matthew began with the prophecies and Moses and created an early life of Jesus to show that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and a new Moses.
- 2. Luke's account is primarily based on literary material and his favorite themes.
 - a. There are numerous literary parallels between the birth of Jesus and that of John the Baptist (e.g., the Angel Gabriel appears first to John's father and then to Jesus's mother to prophesy the coming births).
 - b. The account is filled with canticles (1:47-55, 68-79; 2:14, 29-32) and Luke's favorite topics, including women, the Holy Spirit, and worship.
 - c. Therefore, it appears that Luke began with a literary agenda and his special interests and turned them into a narrative.

II. However, the following material about Jesus's early life is at least probable on the basis of reliable historical evidence.

- A. There is no historical doubt that “Jesus of Nazareth” was raised there, especially since his background in this lowly village was a stigma (John 1:45-46). Matthew even attempted to provide a biblical justification for Jesus being from Nazareth by stressing that it fulfilled a prophecy (Matt. 2:23). Unfortunately, the text which Matthew cited does not occur in the Hebrew Bible.
- B. Jesus’s father must have been a “carpenter” (a worker in wood and stone), since this was a lowly profession which subsequent Christian tradition would not have invented (Matt. 13:55).
- C. As was customary, Jesus followed his father’s profession and became a carpenter himself (Mark 6:3).
- D. I also think that it is highly likely that Jesus was a descendant of David.
1. Conceivably, the early church first concluded on other grounds that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and incorrectly deduced that he must, therefore, have been a descendant of King David.
 2. However, Paul, the earliest Christian writer, already recorded that Jesus was descended from David (Rom. 1:3), and Paul knew James, a brother of Jesus, personally (Gal. 1:18-19, 2:9). Hence, it seems that there was a family remembrance of Davidic descent.
 3. David took numerous wives and had many children, and over the generations the number of people who were descendants of David must have become a significant percentage of Israel’s population. So statistically, it is not surprising that Jesus may have been one of them.
 4. The knowledge that he descended from David helps explain why Jesus concluded that he was the great Son of David whose reign the prophets had foreseen (see below).
- E. During his adolescence and early adulthood, Jesus probably struggled to provide for his family.
1. His father Joseph apparently died when Jesus was only a teenager.
 - a. The last that our sources attest Joseph being alive was when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41-51).
 - b. When Jesus was engaging in his ministry, Joseph had been dead so long that Jesus could be identified only as the “son of Mary” (Mark 6:3).
 2. After the death of Joseph, Jesus, as the oldest son (Luke 2:7), would have been responsible for providing for his numerous siblings (e.g., Mark 6:3) until they grew up.
 3. Jesus’s prolonged struggle to support his family helps explain his profound sympathy for the poor (e.g., Luke 6:20).
 4. And that prolonged struggle may also explain why Jesus did not get married.
- F. Jesus had only a basic Jewish education.
1. Joseph, as a carpenter, probably had little formal schooling and could not have educated Jesus well, and, as a woman, his mother Mary would not have had access to education outside the home.
 2. Nazareth was not an intellectual center. At most, there might have been limited instruction available in the synagogue.

3. Jesus's struggle to provide for his family would have precluded him from engaging in prolonged study.
4. Jesus gained a basic knowledge of at least the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms from hearing them read and explicated during synagogue services. He seems to have become interested in the book of Isaiah, since in his subsequent ministry he frequently alluded to it (e.g. Matt. 11:2-6, cf. Isa. 35:5-6, 61:1; Mark 12:1-8, cf. Isa. 5:1-7).
5. He obviously was intelligent and became able to discuss the Bible in the synagogues and even debate points with the scribes.
6. However, he had little formal education, and probably the Hebrew Bible was the only book with which he had any familiarity.
 - a. In the gospels he never refers to another text.
 - b. Non-canonical scrolls, such as the Parables of Enoch, would have been expensive, difficult for him to obtain, and far less important than the scriptures.
7. John's Gospel reflects historical reality when people note that Jesus "has never been taught" (John 7:15).

The Life of Jesus from the Ministry of John until the Final Trip to Jerusalem

I. John the Baptist

- A. Around 28 CE John the Baptist began a prophetic ministry in Perea (an area ruled by Herod Antipas just across the Jordan River from Judea).
- B. Luke records that John was from Judea (Luke 1:39-40), and his ministry may have been a response to the grim political situation there.
- C. His message was that God was about to judge the Jews through the coming Messiah and only those who repented would escape dire punishment (Matt. 3:11-12).
- D. As a sign of repentance, John administered baptism, a rite which he invented and in popular usage became part of his name.
- E. In line with much prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the required repentance included ceasing to oppress the vulnerable (Luke 3:10-14).
- F. John's preaching especially attracted the marginal (Matt. 21:32).
 - 1. They were more aware of their sinfulness than the respectable.
 - 2. They had a greater appreciation for John's insistence that people stop oppressing the vulnerable and for John's hopeful message of a coming Savior.
 - 3. Hence, the marginal especially flocked to hear John and be baptized.

II. Jesus's association with John the Baptist.

- A. In Nazareth Jesus heard about John and apparently was impressed.
- B. He journeyed south, listened to John preach, and received baptism.
- C. Perhaps during that baptism Jesus got the first intimation that God would call him to be the Messiah.
 - 1. The synoptic gospels record that at his baptism Jesus heard a voice proclaiming that he was God's Son (e.g., Mark 1:9-11).
 - 2. The proclamation recalls Psalm 2 in which God addresses an Israelite king as his "Son" and promises to make him the ruler of the world.
 - 3. Later Jesus would share his visions with his disciples (e.g., Luke 10:18).
- D. For a time, Jesus baptized as an associate of John (John 3:22-24). Presumably, during that period Jesus baptized many people who had sinful pasts and now wished to start a more spiritual life. This experience would contribute to Jesus's later claim that he was especially called to save sinners (Mark 2:17).
- E. Then Herod Antipas, aware of John's popularity and foreseeing the possibility of an uprising, had John arrested (Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII).

III. Jesus accepted a vocation to be the royal Son of David who would bring salvation.

- A. John's arrest was traumatic for Jesus.
 - 1. John had been his mentor whom he must have admired.
 - 2. The arrest of John invited questions about Jesus's own safety as John's associate.
- B. In addition, the arrest raised the issue of who would continue John's mission.
- C. The synoptic gospels record (e.g., Matt. 4:1-17) that
 - 1. Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and fasted.

2. Satan tempted him to use his vocation as “God’s Son” (i.e., the Davidic Messiah) to gain comfort, acclaim, and earthly dominion.
 3. Jesus rebuffed Satan, insisting that as the Messiah he must serve God, not himself.
 4. Jesus returned to Galilee and commenced his public ministry by announcing the beginning of God’s kingdom.
- D. Depending on larger convictions about the supernatural, human psychology, and literary conventions, one can assume that the account is anything from literally true to an edifying myth.
- E. In any case, Jesus somehow came to the conclusion that he himself was the Messiah for whom John the Baptist had been preparing.
- F. Jesus struggled with the questions of how he would get Israel to recognize his Messiahship and what sort of king God was calling him to be.
- G. He rejected the idea that he would be a conventional king who would gain power by political and military means and then reign by force of arms, oppress the poor, and reinforce social hierarchies.
- H. Instead, he would be a servant king who would refuse royal privileges and concentrate on improving the lot of the marginal.
- I. Some of the Old Testament prophets, perhaps especially Isaiah, had foretold a utopian era in which
1. God would heal the disabled (Isa. 29:18, 35:5-6).
 2. Israel would repent of its sins and become a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6).
 3. The Son of David would have an ideal reign and bring justice to the poor (Isa. 9:1-6; 11:1-5).
 4. There would even be a new and superior humanity.
 - a. People would live much longer.
 - 1). Israel remembered a golden era when people lived hundreds of years (e.g., Gen. 5) but accepted that now due to sin humans rarely reached eighty (Psalm 90:10).
 - 2). Isaiah looked forward to a time when human lifespans would once more be much longer (65:20).
 - b. There would never be war again.
 - 1). In the distant past God had fought for Israel, and the Israelites had triumphed.
 - 2). But God no longer fought for Israel, but instead, as punishment for Israel’s sins, God had handed his people into the power of their enemies, most recently, the Romans.
 - 3). In the glorious future there would be no war (Isa. 2:4).
 - c. Everyone would be filled with God’s Spirit.
 - 1). In the past God had only given the Spirit to select individuals called to special missions.
 - 2). But in the glorious future God would pour out his Spirit on all (Joel 3:1-2; Isa. 44:1-5).
- J. Jesus decided that he would proclaim that with God’s assistance he was initiating the fulfillment of such promises and that this beginning was a sign of a more glorious fulfillment to come.

- K. He returned to Galilee, but the people of his native Nazareth could not imagine that someone they knew was so special (Mark 6:1-6).
- L. He established a residence in Capernaum, a town on the Lake of Galilee (Matt. 4:13).
- M. He went from town to town announcing that the Kingdom of God was quietly beginning and later would come in power.
- N. Because the kingdom was already beginning, Jesus adopted a celebratory lifestyle and associated with both the respectable and “sinners,” prompting scorn from critics (Matt. 11:18-19).
- O. To begin the kingdom and show signs of its future greatness, Jesus
1. Worked miracles healing the sick and disabled.
 2. Reached out to the poor and the despised and invited them to become part of the kingdom.
 3. Challenged the rich and the prestigious to surrender their privileges, enter the kingdom, and associate with the marginal.
 4. Offered himself as a model for the new and better kind of human being.
 5. Called and began training a core group of followers who would later rule and to whom he privately revealed that he would be king.
 6. Warned that those who refused to enter the kingdom would suffer disaster.
- We will now consider these things in detail.

The Miracles of Jesus

I. Part of the gospels that critical scholars are confident goes back to Jesus is his reply to the question of whether he was the person whom John had proclaimed was coming (Matt. 11:2-6).

A. John the Baptist was in prison and, as he must have expected, soon to be executed.

B. He had heard about Jesus's ministry and sent emissaries to ask whether Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah whom John had predicted.

C. In reply, Jesus pointed out that, in accordance with the words of Isaiah, he was miraculously healing the blind, the lame, and the deaf (Isa. 29:18; 35:5-6) and preaching good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1) and invited John to draw the appropriate conclusion.

D. Critical scholars are sure that this incident is historical, because elsewhere in the gospel tradition, John the Baptist believes that Jesus is the Messiah (e.g., Matt. 3:13-14), whereas in this passage John shows no faith.

II. As this incident makes clear, Jesus needed to work miracles as part of his mission.

A. The miracles fulfilled biblical prophecy of an era of salvation.

B. The miracles were the primary way of making Jesus's messianic identity credible.

1. As someone with a lower class background from a despised village, he appeared insignificant.

2. His association with "sinners" and his celebratory lifestyle made him disreputable.

3. Without his miracles, which even his critics could not deny, his claim to be starting God's kingdom was highly implausible.

C. Finally, the miracles demonstrated Jesus's concern for the unfortunate and his insistence that the kingdom was especially good news for them.

III. The accounts of Jesus's miracles raise basic questions about what is physically possible and historically verifiable.

A. Can even God enable a human being to do such things as walk on water or raise the dead?

B. Can we legitimately conclude that something took place which could not conceivably take place now? Normally we reconstruct the past by assuming that it is analogous to the present.

IV. How we answer these questions will help determine what we conclude "really" occurred.

V. Additional problems further complicate attempts to discover the historicity of Jesus's wonders:

A. The ancient world attributed certain symptoms to demonic possession, and the modern one attributes the same symptoms to physical and psychological causes (cf. Mark 9:17-18).

B. Jesus lived in an age which more readily believed in miracles and recorded that other figures also worked them. Note, however, that even in ancient times there were a few people who did not believe in miracles and that today most people still do.

VI. Alternative viewpoints about what Jesus did and what we can do.

- A. Traditional orthodox Christian view: Jesus worked wonders which would be astonishing even today, and these help prove that he was divine. This viewpoint implies that we cannot do similar miracles.
 - B. Jesus worked wonders, but he did so only by appealing to God who performed the actual miracles. This viewpoint may permit us to do similar feats if God is willing.
 - C. Jesus like other holy persons had developed special spiritual powers and, consequently, could work wonders. Saints today can do the same.
 - D. Jesus did things which were astonishing to his contemporaries but which today can be explained by ordinary psychological causation (especially, psychosomatic healing). Naturally, we can do similar "miracles."
 - E. Jesus did nothing which was initially astounding. The miracle stories arose later due to the Church's faith in him.
- {Note: One can use different viewpoints to explain different miracle accounts.}

VII. Some historical and textual observations.

- A. The tradition that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and expelled demons is early and widespread and, therefore, has strong claims to historicity. (The so-called "nature miracles" [e.g., the stilling of the storm; Mark 4:35-41] are not usually so well attested [John Meier].)
- B. Ancient critics of Jesus conceded that he actually worked miracles but claimed that he did them by the power of evil (Mark 3:22) or that his miracles were no greater than those of other remarkable individuals.
- C. (review) Jesus's reputed ability to work miracles was primarily responsible for making him a public figure.
- D. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus had difficulty working some miracles, and this difficulty and these particular miracles must be historical.
 - 1. Mark's Gospel records several miracles where Jesus has to strain or even take two tries (especially, 8:22-26, 9:14-29).
 - 2. Since Mark was a Christian writing for Christians, he could not have made up such an embarrassment, nor could the earlier Christian tradition (though Mark used this embarrassment to focus the reader's attention on the cross).
 - 3. Ironically, since the Church would not have fabricated these stories, at least these miracles must have occurred.
- E. In the gospels, Jesus's miracles differ in important respects from the reputed deeds of ancient magicians (John Meier).
 - 1. In the gospels
 - a. Jesus often will not or cannot perform miracles when faith is lacking (e.g., Mark 6:5-6). Faith here means trust in God's power working through Jesus.
 - b. Jesus's miracles are part of a larger spiritual reality--the coming of God's kingdom. Note that he works miracles to help those in great need.
 - c. He does not like to be known only as a miracle worker.
 - 1). In the synoptics he tries to hush up some of his miracles (e.g., Mark 1:40-45).

- 2). In John he calls his miracles “signs” of something greater, thereby indicating that he is not primarily a miracle worker (John 6:26-29).
 - d. He works miracles by a simple command and never tries to coerce God.
 - e. He does not charge.
 2. By contrast, ancient magicians did not expect faith, did not claim that their miracles pointed to a larger spiritual revolution, often pronounced curses on people, advertised their professional skills, used elaborate spells to manipulate spiritual forces, and demanded remuneration.
 - F. Jesus apparently taught that the permanence of an exorcism or cure might depend on spiritual growth in the one healed (Matt. 12:43-45, John 5:14).
 - G. The written accounts that contemporaries of Jesus (such as Apollonius of Tyana and Hanina ben Dosa) worked wonders come from a much later period than the gospels do and so, on objective historical grounds, seem less reliable.
- VIII. Philosophical assumptions which I happen to make.
- A. God can work miracles but does them rarely.
 - B. Since Jesus was fully human, he did not, during his incarnate life, have the divine power to work miracles. Note that Jesus sometimes had difficulty working miracles (see above).
 - C. Saintly people can develop special (“miraculous”) abilities. I also believe that certain individuals (including me) have natural healing powers which strengthen through spiritual growth.
 - D. Exorcisms and psychosomatic cures are often basically the same thing.
- IX. One historical reconstruction of the miracles and exorcisms.
- A. Because of good textual attestation, I think it certain that Jesus did at least some exorcisms and healings which impressed his contemporaries.
 - B. He did these on the basis of
 1. His natural healing abilities strengthened by his compassion and his intimate relationship to God.
 2. The openness of the victim to recognize and grasp this power.
 - C. At least sometimes this power included the mediation of forgiveness, call, or challenge (Mark 2:1-12, John 5:5-9).
 - D. Some of the wonders were psychosomatic. Note Jesus's demand for faith as a precondition for a miracle and his warning that growth was necessary or the demon would return (Matt. 12:43-45).
 - E. I think, however, there were other miracles, especially, the feeding of the multitude, that God worked in response to Jesus's request. These were special signs of the coming of the kingdom.
 1. The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle attributed to Jesus that occurs in all the gospels, and Mark and Matthew even have two versions of what appears to be the same event. So on the basis of attestation, the miracle has extraordinary claims to historicity.
 2. In the accounts of the feeding, Jesus seems to be requesting special help from God by looking up to heaven (e.g., Mark 6:41) or giving thanks (Matt. 15:36, Mark 8:6, John 6:11).

3. The mass feeding especially emphasized important themes about the kingdom.
 - a. When God's kingdom comes in power, even the poor will have plenty to eat.
 - b. In the kingdom all can dine together regardless of purity or class.
- F. Some of the miracle stories in the gospels are not historical but arose out of piety, legend, theology, or literary creativity. I think such is the case with most of the nature miracles (e.g., turning water into wine [John 2:1-11]).
- X. In the gospels Jesus gives to his disciples the power to work miracles, and the disciples have limited success (Mark 6:7-13, 9:14-29).
- XI. I believe that we are called to work miracles today in the same way that Jesus did.
 - A. Those who have the natural gift of healing are to strengthen it through spiritual growth and use it to cure people of psychological or physical problems.
 - B. Sometimes the healer will use forgiveness, call, and challenge when the illness is (partly) due to spiritual defects and the infirm person has sufficient faith to benefit.
 - C. The healer may also need to warn that growth is necessary or the condition will recur.
 - D. We are to pray for God to do other miracles.
 - E. If they occur, we are to proclaim that they are signs of a larger spiritual reality.
 - F. We are not to put on sideshows.
 - G. We are not to advertise miracles to raise funds!

Jesus's Vision of a New Kind of Human Being

I. In the gospels the most frequent title that Jesus uses for himself is “son of humanity” (usually translated, “son of man”).

II. Linguistically, the phrase, “son of humanity,” means a human being. In Hebrew and Aramaic grammar “son of” means a member of a category (e.g., “the sons of Israel” means the Israelites).

III. In the Hebrew Scriptures “son of humanity” emphasizes the lowliness of a human being in comparison with God (e.g., Psalm 8:5).

IV. There has been an enormous, scholarly debate over what the historical Jesus meant by using this title, and no position has been satisfactory. Here I give what in my opinion is the least unsatisfactory one.

V. After Jesus's unexpected resurrection, the early church used the title, son of humanity, in two complementary types of sayings that do not go back to the historical Jesus.

A. The early church, suffering persecution and influenced by Daniel 7, used the title in formulating sayings in which Jesus predicts his imminent return to judge the world.

1. In Daniel 7 God condemns the empires which have oppressed Israel and gives authority over the world to one like a son of humanity, who in the passage symbolizes faithful Israel.

2. After Jesus rose from the dead and Christianity began to be persecuted, the Church enthusiastically looked forward to Jesus's imminent return to judge the world.

3. The Church concluded that Jesus was going to fulfill the vision in Daniel 7 and produced sayings in which he speaks about himself as the future, apocalyptic “son of humanity” (e.g., Mark 8:38).

B. The early church also emphasized that Jesus's obedient suffering was a model for persecuted Christians and produced sayings in which Jesus talks about his future sufferings as a “son of humanity” and which insist that we must take up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:31-37).

C. These two usages were complementary, since the apocalyptic Jesus would judge Christians on whether or not they had been faithful to Jesus's model of obedient suffering.

D. Since the title “son of humanity” literally meant a human being, it was the perfect title to capture the complementarity. Jesus, the risen human being, would judge us on whether we were faithful to his humble example of what a human being should do when serving God.

E. Since Jesus had used the title “son of humanity” to describe himself (see below), it was logical to continue to use the title in new theological reflections on his significance.

F. However, the historical Jesus did not know that he would rise from the dead and, until the end of his life, was not certain that he would be crucified.

1. If the historical Jesus had predicted his resurrection, the initial confusion at the discovery of the empty tomb (Mark 16:8, Luke 24:3-4a, John 20:1-2) and disbelief at the resurrection appearances (Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:11, 37, 41; John 20:25) would be inexplicable.

2. I will argue below that until the last days of his life Jesus hoped to become an earthly king and only predicted his coming murder after these hopes failed to materialize.

G. Therefore, Jesus did not use the title “son of humanity” to describe his future sufferings and resurrection and return to judge the world.

VI. Since Jesus was not well educated, he had no knowledge of the apocalyptic “son of humanity” found in the Parables of Enoch and did not speak of this figure.

VII. Occasionally, when the historical Jesus used the title for himself, he was emphasizing his own limitations, just as we might say that someone is only human.

A. The critics of Jesus dismissed him as a disreputable nobody.

B. A few of Jesus’s uses of the phrase “son of humanity” echoed their criticism. “The son humanity has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). “The son of humanity came eating and drinking” (Matt. 11:19).

VIII. Since “son of humanity” was Jesus’s most frequent title for himself, often it meant Jesus without any further implication (e.g., Matt. 12:32).

IX. I believe that the historical Jesus primarily used the title, “son of humanity,” to indicate that he was the first illustration of a *new kind* of human being.

A. He referred to himself as *the* son of humanity, a usage that seems unprecedented.

B. Since presumably no one doubted that Jesus was a human being, the claim that he was *the* human being suggests that he saw himself as the model for what a human being should or would be.

C. Some biblical prophecies look forward to the coming of a Golden Age in which God would raise up a new and better humanity (see above).

D. And certain texts make it clear that Jesus believed that this age had arrived with him. For example, “If by the finger of God I expel demons, the kingdom of God has come on you” (Luke 11:20).

E. A key text is, “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11), and this text must go back to Jesus.

1. The saying is in the enigmatic and hyperbolic style that was typical of Jesus.

2. Making John the Baptist inferior to the *least* in the kingdom does not fit with later tradition which honored John the Baptist as a great forerunner of Jesus (e.g., John 1:6-7).

3. And this text made Jesus’s hope for a new kind of human being obvious.

X. We have already seen that Jesus worked miracles and gave his disciples power to do likewise.

XI. An additional power that Jesus had and perhaps gave was authority to interpret the law and forgive sins.

A. The gospels emphasize that Jesus exercised an authority that differed from that of the scribes and shocked people (e.g., Mark 1:22).

1. The scribes assumed the divine authority of the Mosaic Law and only based their own authority on the correct interpretation of this law, an interpretation that was subject to discussion and debate.

2. Jesus exercised authority on the basis of an intuitive knowledge of God's will.
 3. Jesus's contemporaries viewed his alleged authority as startling and even offensive (e.g., Mark 11:27-28).
- B. As the first representative of the new humanity, Jesus claimed the authority to pardon sins. "The son of humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10; see also Luke 7:48-50). His critics protested that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:6-7).
 - C. As the first representative of the new humanity, Jesus also claimed the authority to interpret the Mosaic Law. "The son of humanity is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). On occasion he nullified a clear implication of the Law. He forbade both taking oaths (Matt. 5:33-37) and divorcing one's wife and marrying another woman (Matt. 5:31-32), even though the Mosaic Law clearly allowed oaths (e.g., Numbers 30:2) and implied that a man could divorce his wife and marry another (Deut. 24:1-4).
 - D. Later the followers of Jesus claimed (I believe correctly) the right to nullify the Mosaic Law and forgive sins in the name of Jesus (Matt. 16:19, John 20:22-23, Rom. 14).
- XII. By exercising the authority to interpret the law and forgive sins, Jesus
- A. Undermined the authority of conventional religion.
 - B. Delivered from shame people who were stigmatized for not following the ritual law.
 - C. Gave everyone an opportunity to begin a new life regardless of how evil their past.
- XIII. Therefore, a key part of becoming the new human being whom Jesus foresaw was no longer having to conform to a particular culture.
- XIV. This freedom would in time allow all cultures to become part of the new humanity, and I believe that this was at least God's intent.
- A. A number of biblical texts, perhaps especially Isaiah, looked forward to the entire world adopting the faith of Israel (e.g., Isa. 2:1-4, 45:22-24).
 - B. But the very purpose of the Mosaic Law was to make the Jews a special people and preserve their distinctive identity.
 1. The Hebrew Scriptures insist that the Law is to make Israel holy, and the primary meaning of "holy" is set *apart* for God.
 2. Historically, the codification of the Mosaic Law and the pressure to abide by it began with the Exile as a means to preserve Israel's culture when it was in extreme danger of being lost.
 - C. Jesus seems to have envisioned his mission bearing fruit in two phases.
 1. First through him God would renew Israel (Matt. 10:5-7).
 2. Then through the renewed Israel, God would change the world (Matt. 8:10-11).
 - D. I do not know whether Jesus had thought through the international implications of giving to others the freedom to forgive sins and interpret the law.
 - E. However, it was this freedom which allowed the early church to adapt to Gentile cultures and become international.
- XV. Of course, Jesus modeled the new human being not only by what he taught but also by who he was as the first illustration.

XVI. Some aspects of Jesus's personality.

- A. He loved the pleasures of life but apparently was not attached to them.
 - 1. His enemies accused him of being a drunk and a glutton (Matt. 11:19). Of course, the Church would not have made up this allegation!
 - 2. He was able to remain an itinerant dependent on the hospitality of others, a hospitality that was not always provided (e.g., Luke 9:51-56).
- B. He hated pain but was willing to endure it for the sake of love and God's call.
 - 1. Jesus was not an ascetic, and the characters in his parables are seldom heroic.
 - 2. He accepted his death by torture as God's call for him (Mark 14:35-36).
- C. He lived one day at a time in trust and urged his followers to do likewise (Matt. 6:25-34). Note that as an itinerant Jesus himself had to live this way.
- D. He could see into people's hearts and respond to the real person, and, consequently, he brought people's true selves to light.
- E. He was compassionate toward people in need.
 - 1. (review) He healed people of physical and psychological problems.
 - 2. He felt people's pain and confusion (e.g., Matt. 9:36).
- F. He was demanding of his disciples but put up with their failings.
 - 1. Jesus warned would-be disciples of the cost of following him (e.g., Luke 9:57-62, 14:26-33).
 - 2. But in the gospels, he never dismisses a disciple.
- G. He was impatient with all forms of pride and hypocrisy, especially in religious leaders, and was confrontational toward people who had hidden agendas.
- H. He could not be manipulated either by individuals or social regulations.
- I. (review) He acted with authority.
- J. He was humble and pointed away from himself to God. He did not even claim to be good, since only God was good (Mark 10:18).

XVII. Jesus's extraordinary personality was an outward expression of his inner relationship to God, a relationship characterized by intimacy and obedience.

- A. In line with the Hebrew Bible Jesus taught that the most important commandment was to love God with all one's being (Mark 12:28-30, Deut. 6:4-5).
- B. He referred to God as his "Father," a title for God that was not common in Judaism (Joachim Jeremias).
- C. He would withdraw for prolonged periods of solitary prayer (e.g., Mark 1:35). Since Jesus criticized long-windedness in prayer (Matt. 6:7), we may assume that he spent much time in silence with God.
- D. He felt led by God's Spirit. He even claimed that rejecting his ministry as evil was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30).
- E. Just before his arrest he begged God that he not have to suffer but nevertheless prayed that God's will be done (Mark 14:36).
- F. (review) Jesus's authoritative pronouncements came primarily from an intuitive sense of God's will.

XVIII. Of course, no individual should expect to combine all the gifts which Jesus had (including the working of miracles and the authority to forgive sins) or to have a personality identical to that of Jesus.

XIX. However, I believe that all these gifts and personal attributes need to be part of the Christian community, and through these diverse gifts and attributes the community can

empower its members to become parts of the greater humanity which Jesus modeled and predicted.

The Social Teaching of Jesus

- I. A principle of the social teaching of Jesus was that there should be basic equality, or to use Jesus's own image, the first should be last (Matt. 19:30-20:16).
- II. In addition, Jesus wanted all to be able to enter the kingdom if they chose.
- III. To achieve equality and allow everyone to enter the kingdom and be part of a loving community, Jesus had to overcome
 - A. Separating people on the basis of ritual purity.
 - B. Separating people on the basis of hatred.
 - C. Separating people on the basis of their past righteousness or sinfulness.
 - D. Separating people on the basis of their wealth.
 - E. Having the kingdom's leaders take advantage of their followers.
- IV. To do the first, Jesus stressed that ritual purity was far less important than love.
 - A. At least in everyday matters, the most important markers for ritual purity were dietary restrictions and Sabbath regulations.
 - B. Jesus relativized dietary restrictions.
 1. He participated in meals where both the respectable and the impure ate together (e.g., Mark 2:14-17, 6:35-44).
 2. He taught that evil talk which comes out of the mouth was far worse than impure food that goes in (Matt. 15:10-20).
 - C. Similarly, Jesus relativized keeping the Sabbath rest.
 1. He worked miracles on the Sabbath and emphasized that alleviating human suffering took precedence over keeping the Sabbath rest (e.g., Luke 13:10-17).
 2. He stressed that the purpose of the Sabbath was to make life easier, and keeping the Sabbath was not required if it became a burden (Mark 2:23-28).
 - D. Jesus insisted that the two most important commandments were to love God and love one's neighbor (i.e., whomever one deals with; Mark 12:28-34).
 - E. And the test of love was whether it came from the heart (the core of one's being) and manifested itself in concrete acts of mercy.
- V. To overcome divisive hatred, Jesus emphasized that the God who provides for all expects people to love everyone, even their enemies (Matt. 5:43-47), and if we expect God to forgive our sins, we must forgive the sins of others.
- VI. To overcome division over past righteousness or unrighteousness, Jesus stressed that God would primarily judge people not on former conduct but on whether they chose to become followers of Jesus in the present.
 - A. Those who rejected Jesus would fare worse on the Judgement Day than the notorious residents of Nineveh, who at least had repented in response to Jonah's preaching (Matt. 12:41).
 - B. By contrast, those who joined Jesus's movement received from him forgiveness of past sins (Luke 7:47-50; E.P. Sanders).
- VII. To overcome division on the basis of wealth,
 - A. Jesus insisted that (at least, theoretically?) the rich could not be part of his kingdom, and if the rich nevertheless wished to join, they must give away their wealth to the poor (Mark 10:17-31, Luke 14:33). Presumably, many of the poor in question had already become followers of Jesus.

B. On the Day of Judgment God would bless the poor and punish the rich (Luke 6:20-25).

VIII. To prevent the leaders of his movement from taking advantage of their followers, Jesus insisted that the leaders must serve their followers.

A. Jesus recognized that his movement needed leaders, and he himself appointed leaders, especially, the Twelve (see below).

B. However, he stressed that the leaders of his movement were to serve rather than dominate.

1. Leaders were not to have privileges. The first was to be the servant of all (Mark 9:35).

2. The primary concern of the community, including its leaders, was the welfare of the least. The least included

a. The poor. Jesus emphasized that his own ministry was bringing good news to the poor (Matt. 11:5; cf. Isa. 61:1).

b. The sick and disabled.

c. Despised sinners. Jesus insisted that his primary mission was to save sinners (Mark 2:17).

d. Women in general. Contrary to conventional practice, Jesus even had women disciples who accompanied him in his travels (Luke 8:1-2).

e. Children (e.g., Mark 9:37, 42).

1). The larger culture recommended beating children often (e.g., Sirach 30:1).

2). By contrast, Jesus emphasized God's concern for children (e.g., Matt. 18:10).

3). He even stressed that children were in some sense role models. We must become like little children to enter God's kingdom (Matt. 18:3).

IX. It was, of course, hard in practice for leaders to forego all privileges, and, therefore, Jesus constantly warned against the danger of hypocrisy.

A. Jesus felt that the conventional religious authorities misused the Mosaic Law to gain privileges for themselves.

1. The purpose of the Law was to make life better for everyone. "The Sabbath exists for humans, not humans for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28).

2. However, in practice the people who had the responsibility to interpret the Law used the Law to exalt themselves over others (Matt. 23:1-28).

While pretending to interpret the Law impartially, they

a. Used their prestige as the interpreters of the Law to gain public acclaim.

b. Used their interpretations to absolve themselves from any sacrifice.

c. Imposed heavy burdens on others, particularly the lowly.

B. Consequently, Jesus often attacked the lawyers for hypocrisy.

C. And these attacks were an implicit warning to the leaders of Jesus's own movement, and he kept insisting to them that they must actually renounce all privileges, even honorary titles (Matt. 23:8-10).

X. Excursus: Jesus and the Pharisees.

- A. Modern liberal scholars, sensitive to anti-Semitism, stress that the Pharisees were not as bad as the gospels portray and the aggressive attacks on them in the gospels do not come from Jesus but from the early church which the Pharisees persecuted.
 - B. There is no doubt that in response to the persecution, the evangelists used and augmented Jesus's attacks.
 - C. However, hyperbole was part of Jesus's rhetoric, and his bold claims to be able to interpret the Mosaic Law and forgive sins naturally incited angry exchanges.
 - D. Moreover, at the time religious debates between different factions tended to be polemical.
 - E. I believe that the historical Jesus directed his attacks against the more general group of the "scribes" (anyone who on the basis of education exercised authority).
 - F. Narrowing Jesus's criticism to the Pharisees occurred later when they assumed power following the destruction of Jerusalem and the disappearance of the high priesthood. Note the phrase, "scribes and Pharisees" (e.g., Matt. 23:2).
- XI. A reflection on the structures of oppression and how the teaching of Jesus undermines them.
- A. Oppressive leaders try to maintain power by
 1. Persuading the oppressed that the leaders are morally superior.
 2. Giving their more powerful supporters the authority to oppress others, usually women and children and ethnic and racial groups.
 3. Posing as the necessary defender of the community against some enemy.
 4. Claiming to have a mandate from God.
 5. Using violence to suppress legitimate opposition.
 - B. At least by implication Jesus undermined these supports by teaching that
 1. Moral worth depends not on externals but on what is in the heart (the hidden core of one's personality).
 2. The test of a leader's behavior is whether it benefits the *least* in the community.
 3. Individuals and communities are to love their enemies.
 4. On Judgment Day God will be merciful to the weak and demanding of those who had power and wealth.
 5. Love for all. Such love by implication precludes the use of violence for selfish ends.
 - C. Finally, in my experience, oppressive leadership always resorts to hypocrisy (Greek: play acting), and Jesus was especially concerned to expose hypocrisy.

Jesus's Kingship and his Plan to Confront the Nation with His Royal Claims

- I. The principal theme of Jesus's message was the kingdom of God.
 - A. The theme pervades the material attributed to Jesus in the synoptics and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and is what most of his parables explain. Note: In my opinion, recent scholarship has shown that Thomas is dependent on oral tradition already influenced by the canonical gospels. Therefore, Thomas is seldom an independent witness to the authentic teaching of Jesus.
 - B. The kingdom is not a major theme in other early Christian writings (e.g., Paul's Letters) and would not have originated in the Church.
- II. A kingdom implies a king and courtiers and was the only kind of government that Israel had known for a thousand years.
 - A. In the very early history of Israel there was little central government and charismatic "judges" exercised temporary regional leadership.
 - B. But beginning around 1,000 BCE monarchy was the norm while an independent Israel or Judah survived.
 - C. Subsequently, foreign kings (actually, emperors) ruled over Israel until the Maccabean revolt.
 - D. The Maccabees were priests but ruled like a king and ultimately took the title.
 - E. Then Roman domination with its emperors began.
- III. The phrase "kingdom of God" implies God ruling through a divinely chosen earthly king, and was the ideal form of government that the Hebrew Bible remembered and looked forward to.
 - A. The Hebrew Bible emphasized that God chose David and his successors to be the kings of Israel forever (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:8-16).
 - B. When nevertheless the Davidic dynasty collapsed, the Hebrew Bible looked forward to its restoration (e.g., Ezekiel 37:15-28).
- IV. Jesus informed his disciples that he was (or would one day be) Israel's king, and they would be his courtiers. A key quote is Matthew 19:28, "At the universal renewal, when the Son of Humanity [i.e., Jesus] sits on his glorious throne, you who followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." This quote must go back to Jesus.
 - A. After the death of Jesus, the leadership of the Church quickly became three "pillars" consisting of Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus, who was not one of the Twelve (e.g., Gal. 2:9).
 - B. In line with Jesus's emphasis that leaders must act as servants, the quote does not say that the Twelve will rule over the tribes but "judge" them, that is, bring justice.
 - C. This quotation is utopian and suggests that Jesus's kingship might come in stages and only be fully realized much later.
 1. The twelve tribes had not existed for centuries.
 2. The Twelve would reign only after the "universal renewal."Presumably, a lot had to happen before then.
- V. Because of the political situation in Galilee, Jesus could not reveal his royal claims publicly.
 - A. When John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of a Messiah and this proclamation drew crowds, Herod Antipas arrested and executed him.

B. Even without announcing that he was a king, Jesus at least seemed to be in constant danger.

1. There was a rumor that Herod Antipas was about to kill Jesus, and although the rumor proved to be false, it was apparently credible (Luke 13:31).

2. Popular opinion held that Jesus was crazy for preaching about a kingdom, and his own family wanted him to stop and come home (Mark 3:21). Note that the early church would not have made up these negative responses to Jesus's ministry.

C. Therefore, when Jesus revealed to his inner circle that he was indeed a king, he instructed them not to tell people (Mark 8:27-30).

VI. An additional reason that Jesus did not initially reveal publicly his claim to be a king was that his vision of a servant king differed drastically from how conventional kings behaved.

VII. Instead, Jesus had to

A. Complete the difficult task of at least getting the leaders of his movement to give up the thought of having royal privileges.

B. Formulate a plan for how to

1. Reveal to the nation what sort of king he intended to be.

2. Gain royal power even though he had no political or military resources and did not advocate the use of violence for selfish ends.

3. Hint: He would not rely on some fanciful apocalyptic intervention by God.

The Last Days of Jesus

- I. Jesus sent out his disciples to gain support for his mission (Matt. 10:5-15; Mark 6:7-13, Luke 10:1-16).
 - A. The disciples were to preach that the kingdom was beginning.
 - B. To emphasize that the kingdom was good news to the poor, Jesus ordered his missionaries to travel without any money and not to solicit monetary donations. Instead, they were to be guests in people's houses.
 - C. Of course, Jesus knew that many of the people who would hear the preaching usually went to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals.
- II. Jesus travelled toward Jerusalem with his core followers to confront the nation when it gathered for Passover.
- III. Before Jesus arrived in the vicinity of Jerusalem, most people there did not know what to expect of him.
 - A. Galilee was distant and under a different government, and this government had not regarded Jesus as sufficiently dangerous to arrest him.
 - B. (review) I believe that John's Gospel is correct that Jesus had sometimes come to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals which were theoretically required for Jewish males.
 - C. But, presumably, these earlier visits were brief, and Jesus would not have been noticed among the huge festival crowds.
 - D. Matthew's Gospel records that when Jesus in his final trip to Jerusalem staged a dramatic entry, people wondered who he was (Matt. 21:10-11).
- IV. When Jesus entered shortly before the Passover, Jerusalem was seething with anti-Roman resentment.
 - A. Passover celebrated the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.
 - B. This celebration was deeply ironic under Roman rule with troops stationed in the city.
 - C. About the same time when Jesus was there, the Romans arrested a revolutionary named Barabbas (e.g., Mark 15:7) and only stopped short of executing him because of public pressure. There can be no historical doubt that Barabbas existed, since part of the Christian tradition remembered that his first name was Jesus (Matthew 27:16-17 in some ancient manuscripts)!
 - D. The Romans did execute two "bandits" (e.g., Mark 15:27), and "bandit" was the Roman label for an armed revolutionary.
- V. There was the strong possibility that both the people of Jerusalem and the government might conclude that Jesus intended to lead a revolt against Rome or at least would support one. John's Gospel records that the high priest had already come to this conclusion before Jesus entered the city (John 11:45-50).
- VI. When Jesus arrived, the people in Jerusalem had a heightened awareness of scripture.
 - A. Jerusalem was an intellectual center for Judaism.
 - B. The pilgrimage crowds were especially pious.
 - C. The celebration of Passover drew people's attention to scripture, including unfulfilled prophecies of national redemption.

- D. To be sure, the Roman officials were not well versed in Jewish scripture, but they were certainly in touch with Jewish leaders who could give scriptural information if needed.
- VII. In his visit to Jerusalem Jesus engaged in two highly public and aggressive acts.
- A. He approached Jerusalem on a colt while his disciples hailed him as the royal Son of David whose kingdom was beginning: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:1-11; cf. John 12:12-15).
- B. He staged a semi-violent protest in a temple courtyard disrupting business (Mark 11:15-17; cf. John 2:13-17).
- C. There is no question that these two acts occurred, since they are independently attested in both the synoptic tradition and in the Johannine.
- VIII. Both acts consciously invoked scripture and were a signal that he was not a military threat.
- A. The approach without an armed guard and on a colt fulfilled the prediction in Zechariah 9:9 of the coming of a “humble” (i.e., peaceful) king.
- B. The protest in the temple courtyard of the Gentiles consciously echoed Jeremiah’s protest centuries earlier and implied that the Jews needed to reform rather than rebel against the Romans (N.T. Wright).
1. Six centuries earlier Jeremiah had stood at the gate of the Temple and predicted that the Temple would be destroyed unless the Jews of his day repented (Jeremiah 7:1-15).
 2. Jeremiah called the Temple a den of robbers (Jeremiah 7:11).
 3. Jeremiah warned the Jews not to rebel after God subjected them to Babylonian rule as a punishment for their sin (Jeremiah 27).
 4. When the Jews did rebel, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple along with the rest of Jerusalem.
 5. To explain his own protest in the temple courtyard, Jesus quoted Jeremiah’s condemnation of the Temple as a “den of bandits” (Mark 11:17).
 6. And, as noted above, “bandit” was a negative label for a violent Jewish revolutionary.
 7. The implication was obvious: Roman rule was God’s will, and the Jews must accept it peacefully and avoid catastrophe.
- IX. The protest in the Temple was also a condemnation of purity regulations which excluded people.
- A. The Temple greatly emphasized purity, and this emphasis divided people and implicitly degraded those at the bottom. The Temple had a series of zones of increasing purity and increasingly limited access:
1. “The Court of the Gentiles” which was open to all.
 2. “The Court of the Women” which was open only to Jews.
 3. “The Court of Men” which was open only to Jewish males.
 4. The Temple itself which only priests could enter.
 5. The Holy of Holies which only the high priest could enter and only once a year.
- B. Even though Jesus as a Jewish male had legal access to a higher courtyard, he staged his protest in the Court of the Gentiles, the most impure place possible.

- C. And to explain his protest, he quoted Isaiah that the Temple was to be a place of prayer for all people (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11:17).
- X. In addition, the protest in the temple courtyard was a condemnation of the wealth of the high priest, and by implication a condemnation of using religion to exploit the poor.
 - A. The Temple was a source of enormous revenue for the high priest and his circle often at the expense of the poor.
 - 1. The money came both through voluntary donations and the sale of sacrificial animals.
 - 2. Much of this wealth came from the pious poor, a fact Jesus emphasized by pointing out a widow who gave her last coin (Mark 12:41-44).
 - B. Jesus's protest disrupted commercial activity.
 - C. John's Gospel underlines the financial implications of what Jesus did, when it has Jesus condemn making God's house a business (John 2:16).
- XI. Finally, the protest in the temple courtyard emphasized for all to see that Jesus was a king and that he intended to serve the needs of the marginal.
 - A. The kings of Israel and Judah and the emperors of Rome had the authority to regulate religion, and in his protest, Jesus was exercising a similar authority.
 - B. By condemning the marginalization of the ritually impure and the exploitation of the poor, Jesus was signaling what his royal policies would be.
- XII. As intended, Jesus's bold acts made him a celebrity and curious crowds came to hear him.
- XIII. Jesus hoped that he could gain enough public support that with God's help the Romans would consider making him king of Judea.
 - A. Before 6 CE Roman had allowed the Jewish kings, Herod the Great and then Archelaus, to rule Judea, and only a decade after Jesus's death, Rome placed all of Israel under the Jewish king, Herod Agrippa I.
 - B. Jesus had lived under the Roman client ruler, Herod Antipas, in Galilee and could easily have envisioned himself in a similar role.
 - C. Jesus had already signaled that he was not opposed to Roman rule.
 - D. As a king, Jesus would have authority over the internal affairs of Judea and could implement his vision of a society under a servant king who would promote social equality and, especially, help the marginal.
 - E. As king of Judea Jesus would, like Herod Antipas in Galilee,
 - 1. Spare Jews the religious humiliation and violence of direct Roman rule.
 - 2. Keep Jewish resentment against Rome from leading to a futile revolt that would lead to catastrophe. Such a revolt did occur forty years later.
 - F. The hypothesis that Jesus wanted a political appointment from Rome and that the Romans at least suspected this explains two otherwise puzzling facts:
 - 1. Despite the brutality of Roman rule over Judea, Jesus never criticized Rome.
 - 2. Despite Jesus's aggressive proclamation of being a king, the Romans took no action against him until the Jewish authorities had already condemned him to death and pressured Pilate to affirm their decision (see below).
- XIV. Jesus's quest for a political appointment by Rome has important ethical implications for Christians today.

A. It is sometimes necessary and highly ethical to work within a system that is oppressive if one can moderate that oppression.

B. An important test for whether one is being ethical while cooperating with an oppressive system is if one is foregoing all personal advantages of leadership and instead is being a servant of the oppressed.

XV. To combat Jesus's growing popularity, representatives of elite Jewish groups, Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, and scribes debated with him over leading issues of the day, and Jesus made his own positions clear, implicitly appealing for public support (Mark 11:27-12:37).

A. Was it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Romans? Jesus's careful answer to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's implied that Rome had the right to civil authority but not to regulate religious practice.

B. Was there going to be a resurrection of the dead? Jesus affirmed that there would be a final resurrection of the dead, and, by implication, affirmed that there would be a final judgment in which those who rejected him would suffer.

C. Which was the most important commandment? Jesus stressed that love, and by implication, not purity, was most important.

D. What do we know about the Messiah?

1. Jesus pointed out that even his adversaries acknowledged that the Messiah must be a descendant of David and, therefore, by implication Jesus was qualified.

2. Jesus argued on the basis of Psalm 110 that the Messiah must be a king even greater than David and thereby reinforced his own claim to be a new and better kind of king.

E. Who gave Jesus authority to disrupt activity in the temple? Jesus's counter question about where John got authority to baptize implied that Jesus's own authority like John's came from God. By implication, Jesus was appealing to admirers of John the Baptist for support.

F. Jesus lashed out at those who devour widow's houses and make long prayers, thus emphasizing his own solidarity with the poor, his loyalty to the prophetic tradition of social justice, and his hostility to the high priestly establishment (Mark 12:38-40).

XVI. It became clear that although the people in Jerusalem found Jesus entertaining, they were not going to support his royal aspirations.

A. The crowd enjoyed listening to him (Mark 12:37).

B. However, there was no movement to champion elevating Jesus to kingship.

XVII. In response, Jesus like the prophets of old predicted the destruction of the temple and a series of other catastrophes as punishment for Israel rejecting God's will (Mark 13:1-22). As in older prophecies, the description of the catastrophes was general and poetic rather than an exact forecast.

XVIII. Jesus realized that he would soon be killed, and he made this realization public in the surely authentic, allegorical Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-8).

A. A summary of the parable:

1. A man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants.

2. At harvest time he sent a series of slaves to collect his share of the produce.

3. The tenants abused the slaves.

4. Finally, the owner sent his son whom the tenants killed.
 - B. In this parable the owner represents God, the tenants are Israel, the slaves are the Hebrew prophets, and the son is Jesus, the messianic king.
 - C. The parable certainly goes back to Jesus, since there is no mention of a resurrection, as there surely would be if the parable originated in the early church (John Meier).
 - D. We may note in passing that the parable is partly an adaption of Isaiah 5:1-7.
- XIX. Jesus in line with the theology of Isaiah and of the stories of the Maccabean martyrs expected that his suffering and death would help atone for the sins of Israel and that he himself would rise with the rest of the dead on the Day of Judgment.
- A. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 told about a servant whose tribulations brought salvation to sinners and who then triumphed, and Jesus would have applied this passage to himself.
 1. The “servant” suffered and died thereby bearing the punishment for the sins of others and bringing salvation.
 2. Subsequently, the servant was triumphantly vindicated, revered even by “kings” (Isa. 52:15).
 3. Since Jesus saw himself as a servant king, he would have understood the passage as a prophecy of himself.
 - B. The stories of the Maccabean martyrs which Jesus would have known emphasized that the sufferings of the martyrs atoned for Israel’s sin and that the martyrs would rise from the dead on the Day of Judgment and be rewarded (see 2 Maccabees 7, especially, vss. 37-38).
 - C. Therefore, Jesus’s words in Mark 10:45 that the son of humanity (i.e., Jesus himself) would give his life as a ransom for others at least reflect what Jesus believed.
- XX. To prepare his followers to continue his mission after his death, Jesus arranged a solemn farewell meal. There can be no question that the meal occurred. Paul, writing only around twenty-five years later, already described the Last Supper as a bedrock of Christian tradition (1 Cor. 11:23-25).
- XXI. From the various accounts of the Last Supper, it is virtually certain that Jesus did at least three things:
- A. He solemnly announced (what everyone probably already suspected) that he would not dine with the disciples again until the next life (e.g., Mark 14:25).
 - B. He warned them not to betray him and his “covenant” in the meantime (e.g., Mark 14:21, 24). Note: A biblical covenant is a solemn commitment which establishes or deepens a relationship.
 - C. He said that the bread and the wine would be his body and blood (e.g., Mark 14:22-24).
- XXII. Apparently, Jesus intended to institute a memorial dinner similar to the Passover Seder. This new ceremony would
- A. Remind the disciples of his message of inclusion and hope.
 - B. Give them an opportunity to recommit themselves to living and proclaiming that message.
 - C. Make their departed leader sacramentally present in a solemn meal, and, especially present through bread and wine.

- XXIII. The commandment to eat Jesus's body was paradoxical and sounded like cannibalism, and like other "hard sayings" of Jesus
- A. Pointed in a certain direction but could not be taken literally.
 - B. Invited continuing reflection.
 - C. Gave his disciples a sense of unity and equality (since all would share in the same "body").
- XXIV. Luke's version of the Last Supper stresses that Jesus is a servant king (Luke 22:24-30).
- A. Jesus reprimands the twelve for quarreling over which of them is the greatest and says that they are behaving like conventional kings.
 - B. Jesus acknowledges that the Twelve will reign in his kingdom.
 - C. But Jesus emphasizes that he has acted as a servant, and his disciples must not seek worldly eminence.
- XXV. Luke's material referred to above occurs in different contexts in Matthew and Mark (Matt. 19:28, 20:24-28; Mark 9:34) and may not record what Jesus said at the Last Supper.
- XXVI. However, I believe that Luke correctly underlines who Jesus was and what being faithful to the Eucharistic covenant requires.
- XXVII. Jesus's statement about the future at the Last Supper showed that despite his coming death and the disappointment of his royal ambitions, he still trusted that God would vindicate him but did not know how or when.
- A. He spoke cryptically about drinking wine again with his disciples in God's kingdom but provided no details (Mark 14:25). This saying must go back to Jesus, since there is no mention of a coming resurrection.
 - B. I strongly suspect that Jesus had no idea what God would do to salvage his messianic hopes but remained confident that God would do something in the near future.
 - C. Three days later what God would do became clear.
- XXVIII. The arrest and priestly trial of Jesus.
- A. Shortly after the Last Supper, retainers from the high priest seized Jesus and took him to the high priest's residence.
 - B. The high priest had ample reason to want the death of Jesus.
 1. Jesus had disrupted commerce in the temple courtyard, commerce which was necessary both for the rituals of the temple and for the economic support of the high priest himself.
 2. Jesus had denounced the temple as a stronghold for bandits.
 3. He had predicted the temple's destruction.
 4. He considered ritual purity to be relatively unimportant, attacked wealth, and was trying to become king, whereas the high priest's influence depended on purity, riches, and being the Jewish leader.
 - C. The high priest was probably alarmed that the Romans were, at the very least, tolerating Jesus.
 - D. The details of the trial are uncertain.
 1. The gospel accounts differ on particulars.
 2. Since the trial was not public, the evangelists may not have known the details.

E. Nevertheless, I see no reason to doubt the synoptics' testimony (e.g., Mark 14:53-65) that

1. The hearing was brief and abusive and focused on Jesus's attack on the Temple and his messianic claims.
2. Jesus acknowledged that he was indeed a king, but not the kind that his accusers thought. In Matthew's account (whether remembered or imagined) when the high priest demands that Jesus state clearly if he is the Messiah, Jesus replies: "You are the one who said that" (Matt. 26:64).
3. Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy for his messianic claims and condemned to death.
4. The Jewish high council (Sanhedrin) agreed to the verdict.

XXIX. The Roman trial of Jesus.

A. The Roman government did not let Jewish authorities execute anyone, lest they execute Roman collaborators (John 18:31; Raymond Brown).

B. Therefore, the high priest had Jesus delivered to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, with a request for execution.

C. Pilate had no desire to execute Jesus.

1. As a Pagan, Pilate had little sympathy for the Jewish temple.
2. Jesus's actions had made it clear that he had no designs against Roman rule. Indeed, Jesus had denounced violence against Rome by condemning the Temple as a stronghold for bandits (i.e., Jewish revolutionaries).
3. When Pilate inquired if Jesus was claiming to be a king, Jesus insisted that he was a different sort of king.
 - a. Mark records that when Pilate directly asked if Jesus was claiming to be "king of the Jews," Jesus replied, "That is what you would say" (Mark 15:2).
 - b. In John Jesus says that his "kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36-37), and although the statement reflects later theology, it still preserves the memory that Jesus insisted that he was not a normal king.

D. Consequently, as all the gospels attest, Pilate initially tried to release Jesus.

E. However, as he did so, a Jewish mob, probably assembled by the high priest, threatened to riot (e.g., Matt. 27:24) and to denounce Pilate to Rome for tolerating a royal pretender (John 19:12).

F. In response, Pilate reluctantly released a popular revolutionary, Barabbas, to placate the crowd and ordered the crucifixion of Jesus.

G. To protect himself, in case the followers of Jesus protested to Rome, Pilate

1. Found Jesus guilty of treason, which was plausible, since Jesus had claimed to be a king.
2. Ordered the execution of two bandits (i.e., revolutionaries against Rome) alongside of Jesus.

XXX. The death and burial of Jesus.

A. Jesus died a few hours after he was crucified.

B. And he was hastily buried by Joseph of Arimathea. There can be no historical doubt about the burial.

1. Jewish Law demanded that the exposed bodies of executed criminals be buried before sunset (Deut. 21:22-23). And violating this law would have been outrageous on the Passover (John 19:31).
2. The early church would not have invented Joseph, since he came from an obscure village, and he was a member of the Sanhedrin which acceded to the high priest's desire for Jesus's execution (Mark 15:43).
3. The gospels record the names of women who witnessed the burial (e.g., Mark 15:47).

Some Reflections on the Historical Jesus and Christian Faith and Practice

- I. The heart of Christianity is the faith that Jesus was the incarnation of the one God.
 - A. This is the faith that the Nicene Creed, the most authoritative statement of Christian doctrine, insists on.
 - B. It is also the faith that separates Christianity from its present primary competitor, Islam, since Islam accepts Jesus as a prophet but rejects his divinity.
 - C. Faith in the incarnation gives to Christianity its special character as a religion in which
 1. We relate to God not only as our creator and lord, but also as our brother.
 2. We see God as someone who suffers because of human sin.
 3. We do not believe that humans are inherently divine (in contrast to Hinduism) or that humans cannot become divine (in contrast to mainline Judaism and Islam) but that we become divine through sharing in the mission of Jesus.
- II. The historical Jesus did not claim to be divine.
- III. Instead, belief in the divinity of Jesus began with the resurrection appearances in which Jesus was experienced as divine.
- IV. From the experience that the risen Jesus was divine the Church ultimately concluded that the historical Jesus was the human life of God.
- V. This conclusion led to the problem of how Jesus could have been fully human and yet divine.
- VI. In my opinion, the best solution is that proposed by Donald Gelpi that the second person of the Trinity took on the limitations of human life and Jesus could only know and do the limited things that a human can.
- VII. This solution both guarantees the authority of Jesus in his own context, since God himself acted in Jesus, but raises the question of the authority of Jesus's teaching and life in our different context.
- VIII. It is astonishing that so little of Jesus's teaching was specific to his own cultural situation.
 - A. Jesus's culture spelled out exactly what was required for Jews.
 - B. By contrast, Jesus's basic ethics were general, namely
 1. To love God and one's neighbors, which included even one's enemies.
 2. To be aware of what was in one's heart (i.e., the hidden core of one's personality) and avoid hypocrisy.
 3. To have a special concern for the marginal which included the poor, the sick, the disabled, women and children, and the despised.
 4. To disregard what was customary when it conflicted with the above.
 - C. His more specific commandments were either too extreme (e.g., "if your eye trips you up, gouge it out" [Matt. 18:9]) or general (e.g., "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" [Mark 12:17]) to be applied woodenly and only pointed in a direction.
- IX. Historically, the reasons for the lack of specific commandments were that
 - A. Jesus was focusing on preparing for God's future rather than giving a blueprint for his present society.
 - B. He believed that hypocrisy could distort any guideline.

- C. He believed that with the coming of the kingdom, people would have the authority to decide what was right.
- X. A major implication of the incarnation is that God is like the historical Jesus.
- XI. Therefore, my own reconstruction of the historical Jesus makes me think that God is my servant king, and this image of God fits well with my experience.
- A. God is certainly my king whom I must follow and obey.
- B. But it is astonishing how much God serves me, listening to me, comforting me, answering my prayers, helping me in so many other ways.
- XII. In some respects, the future turned out in accordance with Jesus's predictions.
- A. In faith Christians assume that Jesus's resurrection fulfilled his own prediction that he would be vindicated and reign as king.
- B. His prediction that the temple would be destroyed came true in forty years (presumably within the lifetime of at least a few of his younger disciples).
- C. His prediction that the kingdom would come in power was to some extent (especially, in the long run) fulfilled with the rise of institutional Christianity. Of course, how faithful the Church has been to Jesus's social vision is debatable.
- XIII. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that Jesus's vision of a new and greater humanity has never been realized.
- XIV. In response, Christians relegated the new and greater humanity to
- A. Life after death (e.g., we will be perfect after we get out of Purgatory).
- B. Special individuals (i.e., the saints).
- C. Special communities (monasteries, communes) which attempted to live out the radical commands of Jesus and/or exercise his powers. Whether these communities were successful in implementing the new humanity is subject to discussion. My own view is that at least many people who live in special religious communities are not better than other Christians but only have a different set of gifts (e.g., a gift for contemplative prayer).
- XV. I agree that people in heaven are perfect, that saints have often attained awesome characteristics, and that at least sometimes special communities have exhibited extraordinary holiness.
- XVI. Nevertheless, I believe that Jesus's vision of a new and greater humanity was for people in general living in this present world.
- XVII. One can say that since Jesus had only the limited knowledge that a human being can have and that since human predictions of the future are often inaccurate, Jesus's prediction of a new humanity was mistaken.
- XVIII. However, I would propose
- A. The human mind has tremendous powers which few people manage to unlock.
- B. Jesus like saints in various traditions unlocked this power and believed that a time would come when all his followers would also be able to do so.
- C. At least since the eighteenth century, people have increasingly relied on technology instead of spiritual growth to solve social and even psychological and spiritual problems.
- D. Some of the results of technological change now threaten the future of the planet.
- E. Perhaps the magnitude of the impending crisis will allow the latent capacity for a new humanity to emerge.

F. I believe that the best possibility for a new humanity would come from combining the approaches of different schools of religion.

1. The monotheistic religions of the West have attempted to transform humanity primarily through openness to God's love and through social action.
2. The religions that originated in India have attempted to transform humanity primarily through meditation techniques.
3. In China
 - a. Taoism has attempted to transform humanity through getting in touch with the inner child and the energies of nature.
 - b. Confucianism has attempted to transform humanity through education, personal discipline, and ethical rulers leading by example.
4. Today there is an increasing awareness that these approaches can be combined, and this awareness gives me hope.

G. My reconstruction of the historical Jesus facilitates some inter-religious dialogue.

1. Jesus was the heir of the Hebrew prophets and of the biblical concern for the poor and was thoroughly Jewish.
2. Islam is correct that the historical Jesus did not claim to be divine. Instead, this claim came later from his followers.
3. Although unlike Buddhism and Hinduism, Jesus did not teach specific meditation techniques, he did withdraw for long periods of solitary, silent prayer and must have been using some technique.
4. Like Taoism Jesus supported the dignity of children and believed that they could serve as role models.
5. Jesus like Confucius believed that an ethical ruler could transform a society and bring justice for all through leading by example. By being a servant king, Jesus hoped to end the exploitation of the weak.