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The Life, Teaching, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and Some Implications [Lecture Notes]

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The Life, Teaching, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and Some Implications

One Interpretation Among Many

Lecture and Discussion Notes

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

Introductory Matters

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

II. This diversity is due to many things:

A. The subjective biases of scholars in dealing with a figure of such importance.

1. The continuing desire of scholars to make Jesus and his social situation relevant to their own social situations.
2. The impulse to make Jesus like the scholar in question.
3. The desire of orthodox Christians to imagine a Jesus who supports subsequent orthodox dogma and the church institutions which teach it.
4. The contrasting desire of heterodox scholars to imagine a Jesus who undermines orthodox dogma and church institutions.
5. The desire of social activists to make Jesus a critic of existing political and social structures.
6. The contrasting desire of social conservatives to make Jesus apolitical or even a supporter of existing institutions.
7. Discussion: What subjective biases do you bring to the study of Jesus?

B. The limitations of the available historical sources.

1. There are five significant sources of information about Jesus: the New Testament Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.
2. All sources were written at least decades after Jesus's crucifixion and are not independent of one another.
 - a. The Gospel of Mark is the earliest source, and was written around the year 70 when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed (especially, Mark 13:1-2, 14). Note: Because Mark's Gospel is the earliest written source, I will especially rely on it in reconstructing Jesus.
 - b. Matthew and Luke made use of Mark and are no earlier than 80.
 - 1). Matthew at one point alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem as a past event (Matt. 22:7).
 - 2). In his preface, Luke refers to "many" earlier written sources (Luke 1:1), and I deduce from this that Luke is probably the latest of the New Testament gospels.
 - 3). Much of Mark, even the actual wording, reappears in Matthew and Luke, and Matthew and Luke must have made extensive use of Mark.
 - c. Matthew and Luke also share a large block of material, mostly discourse, not found in Mark and much of the wording is the same.
 - d. Consequently, it seems clear that Matthew and Luke either independently used a hypothetical written source (dubbed "Q" in biblical scholarship) or Luke copied material directly from Matthew which is my view. It is unlikely that Q would have disappeared without even a reference in surviving Christian writings.
 - e. Because Mark, Matthew, and Luke share much material, often word for word, they can be compared in detail and are called the synoptic gospels.
 - f. We do not know the oral sources that ultimately lie behind the written synoptic tradition and how reliable they were. They could be anything

from direct eyewitness testimony to a long chain of uncontrolled oral transmission. My own suspicion is that the reliability of the oral tradition varied.

g. Except when we can compare how Matthew and Luke edited Mark, we do not know how much the evangelists put their own stamp on the tradition they received. But presumably, the evangelists at least determined much of the actual wording and arrangement of the oral material when they recorded it. In oral tradition the wording and arrangement of blocks of material normally is fluid.

h. Although the Gospel of John surely contains some accurate historical information about Jesus, the gospel is often less reliable than Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

1). John is late, probably circa 95. The gospel emphasizes that Christians have been expelled from the synagogues (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2), and this event could not have happened much earlier.

2). John is primarily a meditation on the ultimate significance of Jesus as the incarnation of God and savior of the world (note John 1:1-18), rather than a record of what he historically said and did.

i. The Gospel of Thomas comes from the second century (circa 140?) and records oral tradition that has already been influenced by the New Testament gospels, and Thomas has nothing about the life of Jesus, but only what he said.

3. All sources are Christian and look back at Jesus through the lens of the resurrection and the subsequent development of Christianity. For example, the Gospel of Thomas reflects the rise of Gnostic thought after the lifetime of Jesus.

4. The gospels 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]).

5. The gospels contain obvious historical errors. For example, the census in Luke 2:1-2 is not otherwise attested, and no census would have required people to leave their present residence and return to a distant ancestral home to register. Therefore, a census was not the cause of Jesus's parents going to Bethlehem where Jesus was allegedly born.

6. 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.

7. 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).

C. Scholars make different assumptions about the supernatural.

1. Skeptical scholars assume that the alleged miracles and physical resurrection of Jesus must have a natural explanation.

2. Credulous scholars accept the possibility of a supernatural one.
- D. 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 Jerusalem Temple, the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, belief in the divinity of Christ), and is based on uncontrolled oral transmission, 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 in which Jesus tells Peter to pay their taxes by catching a fish with a coin in its mouth is obviously a fable. The story does not even say whether Peter actually found the fish! The fable justifies paying the temple tax which the Romans made mandatory and confiscated after the Temple's destruction.

III. My own perspective.

- A. I am a Western Christian who has spent much of his life teaching in universities and trying to make Jesus relevant to students with varying social backgrounds and varying religious and philosophical convictions. Note: Since I am a Christian I will sometimes in these notes use "we" and "us" when discussing Christians.
- B. I want to make the historical Jesus compatible with orthodox Christianity and with the insights of other world religions.
- C. I also acknowledge my desire to make the historical Jesus relevant to my view of the social situation in this decade (2021-2030). 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.
- D. For both historical and doctrinal 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.*
- E. However, I do not dismiss the possibility that God sometimes worked miracles through Jesus, especially if there is solid historical evidence for the miracle in question. God still works miracles today (on one occasion, in my presence).
- F. I agree that gospel material that is dissimilar to what Christians later taught or was embarrassing to them must be authentic.
- G. However, overemphasizing this indisputable core will
 1. Lead to the loss of the thrust of what Jesus said and did if the Church emphasized that thrust.
 2. And bias the reconstruction against the Church's subsequent claims about

him.

H. 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 synoptic gospels even contain material that was dissimilar to what the Early Church taught or was 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).

I. 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 accurate, as many scholars now recognize.

J. Since the Gospel of Thomas is late and records oral tradition already influenced by the canonical gospels, it should only be used with caution to establish the original form of Jesus's sayings previously recorded in the canonical gospels. But some of the otherwise unattested sayings attributed to Jesus may go back to him. I personally would accept logia 82, 97, and 98.

K. Since the Early Church remembered and honored Jesus, what the Early Church believed and did is at least weak evidence for what Jesus believed and did.

L. 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 gospels basically portray and the Early Church remembered. Instead, such scholarship should conclude that we cannot know much about Jesus.

M. 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.*

N. 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.

O. I also hope that those who disagree with my conclusions will at least gain a clearer understanding of precisely where they disagree and why. To facilitate this goal I will on important and controversial issues

1. Present a range of possible positions
2. And my own position and why I hold it.

The Social and Political Setting of Jesus

I. The Scriptural Legacy

A. Jesus and the New Testament arose out of first century Palestinian Judaism.

B. Consequently, they regarded the Jewish Scriptures as authoritative, saw themselves as the true continuation of Israel, and believed that many contemporary events fulfilled scriptural prophecies. Note: I use the term the "Jewish Scriptures" rather than the more familiar "Hebrew Bible" or the "Old Testament" because during the lifetime of Jesus there was considerable fluidity about which books were scriptural; only the first five books of the Bible (the "Pentateuch" or the "Books of Moses") were universally

accepted as canonical.

C. The theology of the Jewish Scriptures can be summarized in two fundamental convictions:

1. Ethical monotheism

a. There is only one God who is creator of heaven and earth and is Lord of All.

b. This one God is just and is especially concerned about the poor and oppressed.

2. Special election: This one God has chosen to make a covenant with a particular people, the Jews. As part of this relationship, God requires Jews to keep the Mosaic Law which has both ethical (e.g., "You shall not steal") and ethnic requirements. The latter include dietary restrictions, abstaining from work on the Sabbath, purity regulations, and male circumcision. (Note: The term "Law" is ambiguous in first century Judaism and stands both for the regulations in scripture and for the scriptures themselves, especially the Books of Moses where most of the regulations appear.)

D. The two most important characters in the Jewish Scriptures are Moses and David.

1. Moses dominates the first five books of the Bible and was the figure through whom God freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt and gave them their Law.

2. David was the first successful Jewish king and established a dynasty that ruled for centuries. After its collapse there were biblical prophecies that God would raise up a new David who would reign over a renewed Israel and bring justice, peace, and prosperity (e.g., Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:24-25).

II. 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 Jesus's contemporary, John the Baptist, began his ministry around 28 CE (Luke 3:1-2), and apparently Jesus's own ministry lasted no more than two or three years.

C. The gospels record that Jesus was born before the death of King 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).

Note: In calculating how long Jesus lived, one must remember that the day after December 31, 1 BCE is January 1, 1 CE.

III. 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 or near 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 festivals (2:13, 5:1, 7:1-10, 12:1-15) 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 synoptic gospels, 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.

c. The author of John's Gospel apparently had a home in Jerusalem (John 19:27) and may have been with Jesus when the latter came for the festivals.

D. Of course, at the end of his life Jesus traveled to Jerusalem where he was executed.

IV. Throughout the areas where Jesus was, a stark contrast existed between a small, wealthy elite, and a huge mass of poor, many of them desperately so.

A. A tiny percentage of the population owned much of the material property and numerous 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 or war.

D. A significant portion of the population eked out a precarious and degrading existence as beggars, prostitutes, and outlaws.

V. Much of the meager earnings of the poor went to the wealthy.

A. In the pre-industrial world goods and services had to be made by hand.

B. Consequently, no one individual could produce much.

C. The only way that someone could become or remain rich was by taking assets from the large pool of the poor through taxes, rents, and slavery.

VI. The grim economic situation of so many would lead to social unrest under special conditions, but usually these people accepted their plight as the "normal."

VII. Society was patriarchal.

A. Women were mostly restricted to the home and even there were (at least supposed to be) subservient to their husbands and dependent on them for financial support.

B. In the public sphere, whether in politics, religion, or intellectual life, men dominated.

C. Women were also limited by two humiliating social disabilities.

1. Women were ritually unclean during menstrual bleeding, and the uncleanness was contagious. Anyone who touched them became unclean. Presumably this taboo often limited where women could be.

2. Women could not testify in court, and this legal limitation made women more vulnerable.

VIII. Most people lived in the countryside, but power and wealth and prestige were in the cities.

A. Since agriculture was done by hand, a vast number of agricultural workers was essential, and the majority of the population was rural peasants.

B. However, governmental administration was in the cities, and at least the majority of the elite inhabited urban areas.

C. The unfortunate result was that even though the rural population was paying for the elite, the elite looked down on them.

IX. 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 and oppressively, and most Jews there 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 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. The Jewish historian, Josephus, and the evangelist Luke record that Pontius Pilate was responsible for massacres (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII; Luke 13:1).

6. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of Jews cooperated with the Romans, including tax collectors, paid informants, and prostitutes who serviced Roman soldiers. Other Jews regarded these collaborators with contempt.

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 paid tribute, he managed to maintain the appearance of autonomy and respected Jewish sensibilities.

a. He had his own army.

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 (see below), Herod ruled more leniently than the Roman governors in the South, because his Jewish subjects were less resentful.

X. Judaism in Judea (and Samaria) had a number of important sects.

A. The Sadducees

1. Consisted of the high priest and his supporters.

2. They were theologically conservative and did not believe in meaningful life after death.

3. Because of the enormous income produced by the Temple at Jerusalem, the high priest and his circle were wealthy and powerful.

4. The Roman government regarded the high priest as the leader of the Jews.

5. The Romans appointed high priests and removed many, including Caiaphas, who probably was high priest during Jesus's ministry.

6. The high priests seem to have been politically pragmatic and patriotic and cooperated with the Roman government when necessary and resisted when practical. Note: The claim that Caiaphas was a mere collaborator is unlikely. During Caiaphas's tenure the Romans required the high priestly vestments to be stored in a Roman fortress adjacent to the Temple. But when the Romans deposed him and appointed a new high priest, the Romans again allowed the vestments to be stored in the Temple (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII, 85). If the Romans trusted Caiaphas, the facts would be otherwise.

B. The Pharisees

1. Were lay experts on the Mosaic Law.

2. They were legally innovative and attempted to spell out the implications of the Mosaic Law for all of contemporary daily life.

3. The Pharisees were also theologically innovative and accepted more books as canonical than the Sadducees.

4. They taught the late doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and presumably were open to apocalyptic speculation.
5. The gospels condemn the Pharisees as hypocritical, but this condemnation seems to reflect later hostility between the Early Church and the Pharisees rather than a balanced view.
6. At least from their own perspective, the Pharisees were attempting to allow all Jews to please God by fully living according to God's wishes as revealed in the Mosaic Law.

C. The Essenes

1. Are less important for an understanding of Jesus, since they did not associate with other Jews and differed most from them theologically.
2. The fact about the Essenes that is of most interest for reconstructing the life of Jesus is that the Essene leadership was celibate, and this example could have inspired him.
3. Today the Essenes are remembered primarily for the famous Dead Sea Scrolls which seem to be from an Essene library.

D. Armed revolutionaries

1. There were various groups who violently opposed Roman rule.
2. During the ministry of Jesus these groups would have been small and primarily in Judea. Barabbas, who appears in the gospels during the trial of Jesus, was apparently the head of one of these revolutionary bands.
3. The Romans regarded them as mere bandits.

E. Samaritans

1. The Samaritans were not, strictly speaking, Jews.
2. But they accepted an edited version of the first five books of the Bible as canonical and claimed to be descendants of the Northern Tribes of Israel.
3. The Samaritans rejected the Temple in Jerusalem and instead worshiped on a mountain in Samaria.
4. During the time of Jesus Jews and Samaritans did not associate.

XI. Today we have little surviving evidence for Judaism in Galilee beyond what we can deduce from the gospels and archaeology. The other sources on which we depend for knowledge of first century Judaism seldom mention Galilee during the lifetime of Jesus.

XII. But on the basis of what the gospels tell us and what sociology and geography suggest, I would guess that in Galilee Judaism was traditional and insular. Galilean Judaism was largely unaware of and/or unconcerned about controversies in Judea and theological developments there.

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 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.

D. 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 ethnic regulations were regarded as unclean and shunned. Shaming was crushing because society taught that self-worth depended on communal approval.
3. Public censure fell on both those Jews who had no desire to keep the ethnic 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.
- E. Theoretically, Galilean Jews believed the biblical promises that a Son of David would usher in a Golden Age of justice and prosperity (e.g., Ezek. 34:23-31).
- F. 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 the Book of Daniel or Paul's letters was a product of conditions (religious oppression, enthusiasm after Jesus's resurrection) that did not exist under Herod Antipas.
- G. 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, but I suspect that many did.
- H. Since the Maccabees conquered Galilee and allowed Jews to immigrate there from the South, I assume that the Maccabean martyrs and military heroes were celebrated in popular culture (cf. European immigrants to the United States celebrating Columbus Day).
- I. 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. (Note: Therefore the question of whether these accounts are "true" must be decided primarily on theological grounds.) 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, ancient prophets, contemporary saints, even astrologers from the East and a star).
 - E. Matthew and Luke mostly contradict one another on historical matters.
 1. In Matthew's account of Jesus's birth and early childhood, Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph, initially lived in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and only moved to Egypt and then Nazareth to escape him being murdered.

2. By contrast, in Luke's account of the same years Jesus's parents always resided 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 Jewish Scriptures.
 - a. Jesus fulfills numerous biblical prophecies (Matt. 1:23; 2:5-6, 15, 18).
 - b. His life has major parallels with Moses's. For example,
 - 1). According to the biblical account, Moses fled from Egypt to save his own life (Exod. 2:15) and returned to Egypt when God told him that those who sought his life had died (Exod. 4:19).
 - 2). According to Matthew's account, Jesus's father took him to Egypt to save the infant's life and returned to Israel after an angel told him that those who sought the life of Jesus had died (Matt. 2:13-14, 2:19-21).
 - c. Therefore, it appears that Matthew began with the prophecies and Moses's life 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 goals 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 (Luke 1:46-55, 67-79; 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 historically probable on the basis of reliable evidence.

A. Jesus was the first child of Mary.

1. Luke must be correct in asserting that Jesus was her first born (Luke 2:7), because if Mary had previous children, the tradition that Mary was still a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus could not have arisen as early as Matthew's Gospel (85 CE?). Relatives of Jesus continued to be prominent in Jewish Christianity until at least the early second century (Eusebius, Church History III:11,19-20) and would have known if Jesus had an older sibling.
2. Later Joseph and Mary had several other children. These brothers and sisters are clearly mentioned not only in the gospels (e.g., Mark 6:3) but also by Paul who actually knew James and at least knew of his "brothers" (1 Cor. 9:5, Gal. 1:19).

B. There is no 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). But the text which Matthew cited does not occur in the Jewish Scriptures.

C. Jesus's father Joseph 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).

D. As was customary, Jesus followed his father's profession and became a carpenter

himself (Mark 6:3).

E. 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 ancient prophecies had foreseen.

F. During his adolescence and early adulthood, Jesus probably struggled to provide for his family.

1. His father 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," his mother (Mark 6:3).
2. After the death of Joseph, Jesus, as the oldest son, would have been responsible for providing for his numerous siblings 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 (partially?) explain why Jesus did not get married.

G. 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. Probably Jesus was only fluent in Aramaic, the common language in Galilee, but he doubtless knew some Hebrew, the sacred language of scripture.
5. Jesus gained a basic knowledge of at least the biblical books of Moses, 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).
6. He obviously was intelligent and articulate and became able to discuss the Bible in the synagogues and even debate points with the scribes.
7. However, he had little formal education, and probably the Bible was the only book with which he had any familiarity.

- a. In the gospels he never refers to another text.
 - b. Non-canonical books, such as the Parables of Enoch, would have been expensive, difficult for him to obtain, and far less important in his opinion than the scriptures.
8. 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). It is to be noted that in line with the Jewish Scriptures John expected that the Messiah would be a human being from the house of David, not some supernatural figure. Otherwise John could not later have sent messengers asking if Jesus was the one who was to come (Matt. 11:2-3).
- 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 of the Jewish Scriptures, 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 (Mark 1:9). There can be no question that Mark is correct in recording that John baptized Jesus, because that fact was later a double embarrassment to the Church.
 - 1. The baptism made it appear that John was superior to Jesus. In response to this problem, Matthew has John protest to Jesus, "I have need to be baptized by you" (Matt. 3:14).
 - 2. Receiving baptism was normally a sign of repentance and raised questions about Jesus's past. I would only comment that, as we shall see, throughout his ministry Jesus showed little concern about individual sin and concentrated on communal sin and the social structures that enabled it.
 - 3. Discussion: Which does more harm overall, individual sin or communal sin? Is communal sin primarily the result of individual sin, or is communal sin primarily the cause of individual sin?
- C. Perhaps during his baptism Jesus got the first intimation that God would call him to be the Messiah, the davidic king who would bring salvation to Israel and even to the whole world.
 - 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 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 imprisoned (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 106).
- 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. Given the political realities of the time, it was likely that John would ultimately be executed, as indeed, he was.
 - 3. 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 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.
 - D. Depending on larger convictions about the supernatural, human psychology, and literary conventions, one can assume that Jesus's encounter with Satan 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 messianic identity 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 live in luxury, 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 classical prophets, perhaps especially Isaiah, had foretold a utopia 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. 9:1-7; 11:1-5).
 - 4. There would even be a new and superior humanity.
 - a. People would live much longer.
 - 1). Israel remembered a golden age 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 2:28-29; Isa. 44:1-5), and transform everyone's "heart" (i.e., the hidden core of one's being; e.g., Jeremiah 31:33).

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. Jesus thought that what he was initiating was radically new, and it would burst the fundamental limits of the past.

1. Just as a person would never sew a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, one could not fit Jesus's vision into conventional wisdom (Mark 2:21).
2. Jesus's vision even took precedence over the most fundamental ethical duties, such as burying the dead (Matt. 8:21-22) or loving one's parents (Luke 14:26).

L. Jesus believed that at some point in the probably distant future there would be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment and how people would fare would depend on whether or not they accepted Jesus's message. Therefore, he would also proclaim that those who rejected him would suffer final condemnation (e.g., Matt. 12:41-42). It is noteworthy that Jesus did not emphasize that those who supported him would receive blessings after the final judgment. Apparently, the primary blessing that Jesus was offering was the coming of his kingdom which would arrive first and prepare people for the final judgment.

IV. Jesus publicly announced the coming of the messianic kingdom and the need for people to join it now.

A. Jesus returned to Galilee, and began to preach that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Mark 1:15).

1. At present the kingdom was beginning quietly and unobtrusively (Luke 17:20-21).
2. But the kingdom was growing (e.g., Mark 4:30-32).

B. Later the kingdom would come in power (e.g., Mark 9:1).

C. It was important to join the kingdom now, because when it later came in power, those who earlier had refused to join would suffer.

D. He visited his native Nazareth, but was unable to do successful missionary work there because people who had known him before could not imagine he was so special (Mark 6:1-6).

E. He established a residence in Capernaum, a town on the Lake of Galilee (Matt. 4:13) and began to call disciples.

F. He traveled to the surrounding areas preaching.

V. 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).

- VI. To begin the kingdom and show signs of its future greatness, Jesus
- A. Offered himself as a model for a new and better kind of human being.
 - B. Worked miracles healing the sick and disabled.
 - C. Reached out to the poor and the despised and invited them to become part of the kingdom.
 - D. Challenged the rich and the prestigious to surrender their privileges, enter the kingdom, and associate with the marginal.
 - E. Privately revealed to a core group of his followers that he would be a political king and they would share in his rule, and he trained them for their new role.
 - F. Formulated a practical plan for how he would gain political power.
- We will now consider these things in detail.

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. First the Early Church produced sayings that depict Jesus as the final judge who would soon return as the son of humanity.
 - 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 and save his followers.
 - 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 his followers must take up their 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 the earthly 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 his followers on whether they 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 prior to the general resurrection and, until the end of his life, was not certain that he would be crucified.

1. If the historical Jesus had predicted his imminent 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, 36-37, 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 execution 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 couple of Jesus’s sayings that use 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 is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28), and this text must go back to Jesus.

1. The saying is in the enigmatic and hyperbolic style that was typical of Jesus. Note that Jesus's statements point in a direction but are often so extreme or general that the hearers must make the specific application.
2. Making John the Baptist inferior to the *least* in the kingdom does not fit with later tradition which honored him 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. Jesus modeled the new human being by who he was as the first illustration.

XI. 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. 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. And he could severely rebuke his disciples when they did not live up to his expectations. "No one who puts a hand on a plow and looks back is fit for God's kingdom" (Luke 9:62). Once he even called Peter, one of his most prominent disciples, "Satan" (Mark 8:33). Since Peter was a leading figure in the Early Church, the incident must go back to Jesus.
 3. But in the gospels, he never dismisses a disciple, and he warned about the danger of trying to root out bad people from his movement (Matt. 13:24-30).
 - G. Jesus was impatient with pride and hypocrisy, especially in religious leaders, and was confrontational toward people who had hidden agendas.
 - H. He had an ironic sense of humor which he used to critique others.
 1. He satirized the false piety of those who sounded a trumpet when they gave alms (Matt. 6:2) or who emphasized minor matters while neglecting major ones, "straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel" (Matt. 23:24).
 2. He gave ironic nicknames to his closest followers, calling James and John "Thunderers" (Mark 3:17) and calling Simon "Rocky" ("Peter;" Mark 3:16), a wry comment on Peter's lifelong tendency to make dramatic initiatives and then backpedal.
 - I. He could not be manipulated either by individuals or social regulations. People who appealed to custom, Mosaic Law, or public opinion to try to limit what Jesus could teach or do invariably failed.
 - J. He acted with authority. For example, he summoned individuals to become his disciples rather than waiting for them to volunteer (Mark 1:16-20, 2:14).
 - K. 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).
- XII. 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 Jewish Scriptures 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; see below for more details).
 - 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. Jesus's authoritative pronouncements came primarily from an intuitive sense of God's will.

XIII. Topics for discussion: To what extent can any individual resemble Jesus? To what extent can any Christian community expect to have all of the gifts that Jesus had? To what extent can we insist that every individual and community today be radically different from Jesus? What individuals do you admire and why, and how are they like or unlike Jesus?

As the First Illustration of the New Humanity Jesus Invited His Followers to Participate in His Filial Relationship With God

I. The Jewish Scriptures only rarely refer to God as "Father" (for example, only three times in the Psalms [68:5, 89:26, 103:13]) and even more rarely address him as "Father" (never in the Psalms; e.g., Isa. 63:16). I use the Psalms to illustrate because they are the prayer book and hymn book of the Jewish Scriptures and were used in the worship services that Jesus attended in the synagogues.

II. Perhaps one reason for the rarity of calling God "Father" is that the God of Israel, in contrast to the deities of the surrounding nations, did not procreate.

A. The deities of the surrounding nations had sexual intercourse and were the biological parents of other deities and sometimes even of important individuals, such as rulers.

B. The God of Israel, at least in the Bible, did not have sex, and had no genetic relationship with anyone.

III. In the Jewish Scriptures beings are metaphorical children of God (often "Sons of God") by either

A. Sharing in God's power, as, for example, angels ("Sons of God") do.

B. Sharing in God's goodness (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 2:18).

IV. Israel as a whole is a Son of God (e.g., "Israel is my first born son;" Exodus 4:22). Because of this special relationship

A. In the Jewish Scriptures God gives Israel power to defeat its enemies

B. Calls Israel to be more righteous than other nations (even if Israel does not usually obey).

V. Israel becomes God's Son by adoption, especially, when agreeing to the covenant.

A. God adopts Israel by graciously freeing the Hebrews from slavery.

B. Israel enters into a voluntary and binding commitment by making a covenant with God and agreeing to abide by the Law code that God gives through Moses.

VI. Subsequently, at the installation of a king of Israel or Judah, he becomes God's Son (e.g., "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" [2 Sam. 7:14]), because the king is the representative of God's people and the one most responsible for making them obedient to God by enforcing justice.

VII. Since the image of God as a Father is a metaphor (unlike in other religions of the time where the image was often meant literally), we need to discuss what human fatherhood meant during the biblical period.

A. Of course, fatherhood has many dimensions that have remained constant during human history. These include

1. The love of a father for a child.

2. The love which the child is at least expected to have for a father.

3. The dependence of the child on the father (and mother).

4. The expectation that until the child is old enough to take responsibility for his/her own life, the child will normally obey the father (and mother).
 5. The mutual knowledge that a father and his child have of each other.
- B. Nevertheless, family relations vary between cultures and evolve over the centuries. The following are especially significant differences between how fathers were understood in biblical times as opposed to how fathers are increasingly seen today, at least in the Western culture where I live.

1. The understanding of the biology of conception is different today.
 - a. Today we know that conception occurs when a sperm from a man and an egg from a woman unite. For us, a human being is genetically equally the product of the mother and father and environmentally more a product of the mother, since the fetus matures in the womb.
 - b. By contrast, in biblical understanding, the father produces the seed and plants it in the womb during intercourse. All that the mother provides is the fertile soil (actually, blood) where the seed can grow. Hence, in biblical understanding a human being is primarily the product of the father and only secondarily the product of a mother. And in the biblical genealogies, descent is traced through the male line.
2. The roles of parents are different now from biblical times.
 - a. More and more today, mothers and fathers have an equal role in raising children, and both parents work outside the home to provide for them.
 - b. In ancient times, the father was the undisputed authority in the family and usually worked at home or nearby and was the principal wage earner. Children were totally dependent economically on the father and were supposed to be totally obedient to him.
 - c. Children (especially, sons) were expected to model themselves on their fathers, whereas today we encourage people to become individuals and not merely to "conform."

VIII. Jesus taught his disciples to address God as "Father" in the Model Prayer he gave them (Luke 11:2-4). By doing so

- A. Jesus was inviting them to see God as someone
 1. Who loved them deeply.
 2. Whom they were to love above all else (cf. "the first and great commandment") and obey.
 3. Someone on whom they were totally dependent.
 4. Who created (but not procreated) them.
 5. Who would be their lifelong role model.
- B. His disciples became God's children not by natural birth but by entering into the community (the Kingdom of God) that Jesus was beginning. It is especially noteworthy that in the gospel witness
 1. Jesus distinguishes between "my father" and "your father."
 2. Hence, it seems that Jesus saw himself, to use the language of Romans 8:29, as the "firstborn among many brothers" and sisters. Jesus was God's firstborn son, and other people became God's sons and daughters through joining his community. "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister" (Mark 3:35). Note that as the "Messiah" Jesus would have continued the tradition of seeing himself as "Son of God," the representative and leader of the New Israel.
- C. Discussion: Since our biological and social understanding of fatherhood differs

from that of Jesus's society, is continuing to call God "Father" being fully faithfully to Jesus's intent? If not, what way of describing and addressing God would come closer to what Jesus meant by the metaphor of "father"?

As the First Illustration of the New Humanity, Jesus Exercised the Authority to Interpret the Law and Forgive Sins.

- I. The gospels emphasize that Jesus exercised a spiritual authority that differed from that of the scribes and shocked people (e.g., Mark 1:22).
 - A. In the gospels, "scribes" are specialists in interpreting the Mosaic Law.
 - B. 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.
 - C. Jesus exercised authority on the basis of a personal knowledge of God's will and sometimes used that authority to question the appropriateness of things in the Mosaic Law (see below).
 - D. Jesus's contemporaries viewed his alleged authority as startling and even offensive (e.g., Mark 11:27-28).
 - E. 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). His critics protested that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:6-7, Luke 7:49).
 - F. As the first representative of the new humanity, Jesus also claimed the authority to interpret the Mosaic Law.
 - 1. He taught that the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18, Mark 12:31) was more important than other commandments.
 - 2. He regularly excused Sabbath work that helped people, and insisted, that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:12), and "the son of humanity is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). He defended his disciples when they were hungry and picked grain and ate it on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-26).
 - 3. 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).
 - G. 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).
- II. 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 ethnic regulations in the Mosaic Law.
 - C. Gave everyone an opportunity to begin a new life regardless of how evil their past.
- III. Therefore, a key part of becoming the new human being whom Jesus foresaw was no longer having to conform to a particular culture.
- IV. This freedom would in time allow all cultures to become part of the new humanity, and, as a Christian, 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 Jewish 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 as a means to preserve Israel’s culture when it was in extreme danger of being lost because the Jewish leadership was in exile.
- 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.

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 probably 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 gospels, John the Baptist believes that Jesus is the Messiah (e.g., Matt. 3:13-14), whereas in this passage John shows no faith. Hence, the Church would not have invented this scene.
- 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 in the past 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. 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, people now 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.

F. One can use different viewpoints to explain different miracle accounts.

G. Discussion: Which viewpoint do you hold, and why do you hold it?

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, at least on the basis of documentation, 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). Note that Matthew and Luke who used Mark as a source left out these difficulties.

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), and he refuses to work miracles to inspire faith in skeptics (Mark 8:11-12). 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 (Luke 11:20). 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 Matthew, Mark, and Luke 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.

f. He does not work a miracle to harm someone.

2. By contrast, ancient magicians did not expect faith, did not claim that their miracles pointed to a larger spiritual revolution, advertised their professional skills, used elaborate spells to manipulate spiritual forces, demanded remuneration, and often pronounced curses on people.

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. Assumptions which I happen to make.

A. God can work miracles but does them infrequently.

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. Sainly 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.

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, and perhaps the raising of Lazarus 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 (Luke 6:21).

b. In the kingdom all can dine together regardless of purity or class.

4. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is not well attested, since it only occurs in John's Gospel (11:38-44).

5. But several things suggest historicity (John Meier).

a. The evangelist seems to have a special source of information about events in Judea. I suspect that he lived there.

b. The miracle account preserves the location of the miracle, Bethany, and the names of Lazarus and his sisters.

c. Jesus does not work the miracle by his own power, but instead appeals to God by raising his eyes and thanking God for listening to him.

d. The miracle demonstrates the important theological point that life after death is available through Jesus.

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 (Mark 6:7-13).

XI. But the disciples have only limited success due to insufficient faith and prayer (Mark 9:14-29).

XII. I believe that the followers of Jesus are called to work miracles today in the same way that he 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. Christians 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 whether in a tent or a media studio.

G. We are not to advertise miracles to raise funds!

H. Discussion: How do you feel about my understanding of the miracles of Jesus?

Jesus's Way of Teaching as Opposed to Other Ways

I. The teaching attributed to Jesus is full of things that are strange.

A. Overly radical material (e.g., Matt. 8:22, Luke 14:26).

B. Stories that have realistic settings but unrealistic plots (e.g., Matt. 20:1-15).

II. It is clear that such puzzling material is authentic.

A. Such material is typical of the Jesus tradition in all sources, including John and Thomas.

- B. Apart from sayings attributed to Jesus, we seldom find this kind of material in the early Christian tradition.
- C. The tradition sometimes tries to soften or explain such sayings (note, e.g., Matt. 10:37, Thomas 101, and Mark 10:25 versus 10:27).
- III. Once we recognize that disturbing original statements were softened or explained later, we discover that many sayings which later seemed unobjectionable must have been problematic initially (see below for examples).
- IV. Because such disturbing material pervades Jesus's teaching, it is obviously important, and we must discover what its purpose was.
- V. Two scholarly viewpoints:
 - A. Conservative (e.g., Bruce Metzger): The wildness is only Semitic stylistic exaggeration.
 - B. Radical (e.g., John Dominic Crossan): The wildness is to shatter our normal way of perceiving.
- VI. These two viewpoints also correspond to two different types of courses in educational institutions.
 - A. Some courses clearly cover accepted knowledge; the teacher reviews the information and the student learns it.
 - B. In other courses the student presents controversial material and the instructor critiques the student without providing an alternative answer.

Discussion: Which type of course do you prefer, and why?
- VII. Both types of courses can have serious weaknesses.
 - A. Simply learning conventional material
 - 1. Often allows the student to repeat the material without understanding why the material is true or even what it means and how it can be applied.
 - 2. Does not allow the student to find mistakes in conventional wisdom.
 - B. Simply challenging the student without providing conventional answers allows students to formulate personal opinions which conventional wisdom has conclusively demonstrated are mistaken.
- VIII. These two approaches also correspond to two great schools concerning religious teaching and its proper medium.
 - A. The tradition that instruction should be as clear as possible so disciples can easily learn what to believe and do. According to this school, the proper medium is creed and law. On the whole Judaism and Islam follow this tradition. It *affirms* one's present understanding of the divine and the world.
 - B. The tradition that teaching should be paradoxical so disciples must struggle to find the truth and the truth they find is really their own.
 - 1. An extreme version of this approach is the koan or the unanswerable riddle. (E.g., "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"). Zen Buddhism employs this technique.
 - 2. A milder version of this approach is apophatic instruction in spiritual direction. The director tells the novice everything that God is not, and the novice has to discover what God is.
 - 3. This approach *destroys* one's present understanding of the divine and the world and thereby allows one to come to a radically different view based on one's own experience and thought.
- IX. In my opinion, the teachings of Jesus mediate between these approaches both in terms of form and content.
 - A. Form

1. The sayings of Jesus present life as it is, or, at least, as it possibly could be. There is no "one hand clapping."
2. Yet, the reality that is presented is exaggerated, twisted, made bizarre. For example, we are to let the dead do the burying (Matt. 8:22) and hate our father and mother (Luke 14:26).

B. Content

1. Jesus's teachings point in a certain direction.
2. However, the specifics are so vague or outrageous that it is difficult to apply them exactly or take them literally.

C. Accordingly, the teaching of Jesus clearly presents general principles but does not let us take them or their application for granted. Instead, we must struggle and question and come to a personal appropriation. Hence, the teaching of Jesus *exposes* the world and challenges us to rethink our understanding of God and the world. Jesus makes us see things the way they actually are and struggle with what they could become with the arrival of God's kingdom.

X. By pointing in a certain direction but not giving specifics, Jesus produced a feeling of moral equality among his followers.

A. No disciple was "good" enough to fulfill the extreme demands. E.g., "You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

B. Any disciple could improve.

C. Consequently, there was challenge and reassurance for everyone, and no one could look down on others by claiming to have done all that was expected.

XI. This sense of moral equality facilitated Jesus's attempt to bring the conventionally righteous and sinful into a single community.

XII. First century Judaism's concern for legal codification and instruction implies, or, at least, easily encourages, basic spiritual assumptions.

A. Sin, at least among pious people, is primarily due to a lack of information or effort.

B. External behavior is what is most important and normally reflects the intentions of the heart.

C. The general is usually an adequate basis for understanding the particular.

D. Without detailed instruction people cannot figure out what they should do.

E. Basically we understand God's viewpoint.

XIII. It appears that Jesus disagreed with each of these assumptions. Note that although Jesus mostly accepted the Mosaic Law, he was not interested in codifying it further and was critical of people who applied it in the customary ways. According to Jesus,

A. Sin is due neither to lack of information nor effort but to a fundamental brokenness hidden deep within (e.g., Matt. 12:34-36, 15:18).

B. What is most important is the "heart" (i.e., the hidden core of our identity), and outwardly correct behavior is often a mask for evil intentions.

1. We do not even know our wicked motives. The light in us may be darkness (Matt. 6:23).

2. We presume to teach and judge others, even though we are more evil than they (Matt. 7:3).

3. Religious leaders are especially vulnerable to such hypocrisy and produce societal blindness.

C. The particular is important and often cannot be correctly understood on the basis of the general.

D. Once we have overcome the evil in our hearts, we can easily determine what should be done in specific situations.

E. God is both more merciful toward the sinner and more severe toward the righteous than we can readily imagine.

XIV. 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, generally women and children, ethnic, racial, and religious groups, and non-heterosexuals.
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.
6. Encouraging people not to think critically.

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 (Matt. 5:43-45).
4. On Judgment Day God will be merciful to the weak and demanding of those who had power and wealth. Those to whom much is given much will be expected (Luke 12:48).
5. Violence is unacceptable even in response to violence (Matt. 5:39).
6. To understand and benefit from Jesus's own sayings, one must think critically.

C. Finally, in my experience, oppressive leadership always resorts to hypocrisy (Greek: play acting), and Jesus was especially concerned to expose hypocrisy.

Two Illustrations of How Taking the Rhetoric of Jesus Seriously Leads to a Reinterpretation of Some of His Sayings: The Parable of the Lost Sheep and Jesus's Statement Forbidding Divorce.

I. The Parable of the Lost Sheep has been a favorite of Christians down through the centuries who correctly interpreted it to be about God's great mercy to the lost, but there was another dimension to the story that was often forgotten.

II. The parable appears in three different forms in the gospels:

Matthew 18:12-14: "What do you think? If some person owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go and seek the one who has wandered away? And if he finds it, truly I say to you that he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which did not wander away. Even so it is not the will of your father in heaven that one of these little ones perish."

Luke 15:3-7: And he said to them this parable, "What person among you who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them does not abandon the ninety-nine in the desert and go for the lost until he finds it? And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulder rejoicing. And when he comes to the house, he calls together friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I found my lost sheep.' I say to you even so there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who have no need of repentance."

Thomas 107 (translated by Bruce Metzger): Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them went astray; it was the largest. He left the ninety-nine (and) sought for the one until he found it. After he exerted himself, he said to the sheep, 'I love you more than the ninety-nine.'"

III. In Matthew's version of the parable the lost sheep represents two groups, the lowly Christian and the sinful one.

A. Matthew places the parable in the middle of Jesus's sermon on church life (chapter 18).

B. The material right before the parable emphasizes the importance of church leaders not abusing the little ones, that is the least prestigious members of the community.

C. The material right after the parable emphasizes the importance of forgiving sinful members of the congregation and the great lengths to which the leadership must go before actually expelling a member.

D. By implication, the parable of the lost sheep makes both points.

IV. Luke, in my opinion correctly, insists that the Parable of the Lost Sheep was a defense of Jesus's ministry to tax collectors and sinners.

V. In all the versions of the parable, the lost sheep receives more love and produces more joy than the rest of the sheep who did not stray.

VI. What has only sometimes been noticed is that the shepherd endangers the other sheep to save the lost one.

A. In all versions of the parable the shepherd abandons the other sheep, and Matthew and Luke explicitly state that the shepherd abandons the other sheep in the open country.

B. As Jesus surely knew being a country boy, though Matthew and Luke probably did not, sheep abandoned in the open country would wander off, scatter, and be easy prey for wolves.

C. The version of the parable in Thomas tries to justify abandoning ninety-nine to save one lost by saying that the lost sheep was the largest and, by implication, the most valuable.

VII. The basic parable of the lost sheep must go back to Jesus.

A. All the versions of the parable have the same outline of a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep to find one and then rejoicing over the one more than over the others.

B. Yet, all of the versions differ greatly in detail and must to some extent be independent of each other.

C. Therefore, the basic parable goes back to Jesus.

VIII. Since the shepherd endangers the ninety-nine in all surviving versions of the parable, this detail must have been in the version(s?) that Jesus himself told.

IX. The behavior of the shepherd is crazy; no sane shepherd would risk the lives of ninety-nine sheep to save one.

X. Therefore, in addition to the familiar and obvious point that God loves even sinners, the parable makes two disturbing points:

A. Faithful people must not resent God's mercy to sinners, even when that mercy is extravagant and totally undeserved. Note that the sheep got all that love and inspired all that joy by becoming lost and needing to be found.

B. God is not accountable to human notions about what is fair or even sane.

XI. Of course, these points were a defense of Jesus's ministry to "sinners."

XII. The historical Jesus taught that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman

commits adultery.

A. This core occurs in Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18. Admittedly, Matthew 5:32 only mentions a man divorcing a wife, not divorcing her and marrying another woman. However, I think that here Matthew is condensing.

B. The core must go back to Jesus, since as we will see, it fits his rhetoric and social concerns.

C. In the gospels there are expansions or an alteration of the core:

1. A woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery (Mark 10:12).

2. A man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:32, Luke 16:18).

3. A man who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery (i.e., she will be forced to marry again or become a prostitute [Matt. 5:32]).

4. A man who divorces his wife *except on the grounds of adultery* commits adultery (cf. Matt. 5:32, 19:9).

D. The expansions and the alteration are from the Early Church to make the commandment more relevant, logical, or less demanding.

1. Mark's addition of a woman divorcing a man makes the saying more relevant to his situation.

a. It would have been difficult in Jewish Palestine for a woman to divorce her husband, and Jesus did not foresee this possibility.

b. But a woman could divorce a man under contemporary Greek and Roman law.

c. The Gospel of Mark is in Greek and was probably written in Rome.

d. Logically, if it is wrong for a man to divorce his wife to marry again, it must be wrong for a woman to divorce her husband to remarry.

2. If divorce and remarriage is adultery, then logically marrying a divorced woman must be adultery.

3. Forbidding divorcing a wife if doing so will force her into committing adultery limits the commandment to especially needy circumstances and seems to be a later concession. By implication, it is permissible to divorce women who are able to remain celibate subsequently.

XIII. The original core teaching that it is adultery for a man to divorce his wife and marry another woman is both paradoxical and extreme: By definition, adultery is only possible if someone is (still) married (Bruce Malina)!

XIV. Like other such teachings of Jesus, this saying was meant to point in a particular direction and provoke the hearers to come up with their own specific applications.

XV. Apparently, Jesus wanted to make at least three points:

A. Marriage is not primarily a legal contract but a psychosomatic unity, and adultery is primarily a matter of the heart, not a matter of law. Hence, divorce and remarriage can be adultery.

B. Jewish law about divorce and remarriage did not sufficiently honor the rights of women. A husband could divorce his wife for any reason, and a divorced woman was usually in a precarious economic and social position.

C. With the coming of God's kingdom, people were gaining a new power to love and be faithful.

D. Discussion: Since Jesus said that human beings have the power to interpret the Law, and since Jesus's commandments point in a certain direction but are generally too extreme to be applied literally, how would you apply Jesus's statement on divorce

today? Note that already in the Early Church the absolute prohibition of divorce proved to be impracticable and exceptions had to be made. If a Pagan spouse left a Christian, the Christian was free to divorce and remarry (1 Cor. 7:15), or if a spouse committed adultery, the injured party was free to divorce and remarry (Matt. 5:31-32, 19:9).

The Special Problems of Reconstructing and Interpreting the Stories Told by Jesus; Part I: Developing a Methodology

- I. The gospels contain dozens of “parables,” and it is important to know how to interpret them.
- II. There are serious problems in interpreting the “parables.”
 - A. The category of “parables” is itself broad and vague.
 1. The etymology of the Greek word (*parabole*) suggests a comparison of two different things.
 - a. “Para” means “beside,” as in parallel lines.
 - b. “Ballein means to throw, as in ballistics.
 - c. Hence, a parable throws two things together and invites us to make sense of the juxtaposition. Note that such vague, figurative comparisons inevitably lead to ambiguity.
 2. There is a tremendous variation in the length of the gospel “parables” from a couple of words (Luke 4:23) to an entire short story (Luke 15:11-32).
 3. And the term covers all sorts of metaphorical speech. For example, “Physician heal yourself” is a “parable” (Luke 4:23).
 - B. However, here we will only deal with narrative parables (that is, parables that at least have one character [not necessarily human!] doing something).
 - C. Probably only the basic outline of a narrative parable was faithfully preserved. The minor details, including much of the wording, may have changed with each oral telling. When the evangelists recorded a parable, they must have been aware of the fluidity of the oral tradition and felt free to make further changes. As we saw above, the surviving versions of the Parable of the Lost Sheep differ considerably.
 - D. There is a tremendous variation in the obviousness of the point of the parable narratives.
 1. Occasionally the gospel actually states the moral (e.g., Luke 18:1).
 2. Sometimes there is no explicit interpretation, but nevertheless the meaning is clear.
 3. But at other times the point of the parable even puzzled the evangelists. For example, the various desperate morals that Luke attempts to draw from the difficult Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13) attests that neither he nor his source had a clue as to what the parable was supposed to teach. Many modern preachers and scholars seem equally in the dark!
 - E. It is often difficult to determine whether a parable in the gospels originated in the teaching of Jesus or only in the Early Church.
 1. The parables in the gospels are always attributed to Jesus.
 2. But if Jesus taught in parables, it seems likely that his students followed his example (John Meier).
 3. If they did, it seems even more likely that in time the source of these parables was forgotten and the parables were subsequently attributed to Jesus.
 4. And if Jesus was free to teach in fictional stories, could not his biographers, the

evangelists, have felt free to do the same? Certainly, some of the gospel stories about Jesus are obviously later inventions. As mentioned earlier, Matthew 17:24-27 in which Jesus tells Peter to pay their taxes by finding a fish with a coin in its mouth is a clear example. Regardless of whether Matthew composed the story, he must have *known* that it was not literally true. An example of a fictional story that an evangelist almost certainly composed is the cursing of the fig tree in Mark's Gospel.

a. The narrative comes in two sections:

- 1). The day after Jesus has visited the temple, he is hungry and sees a fig tree and looks for fruit on it and, finding nothing but leaves, curses the tree so that no one will ever eat from it again (Mark 11:12-14). Then Jesus stages a semi-violent protest in the temple.
- 2). The next morning the disciples see that the tree has withered, and Peter tells Jesus who then comments on the power of faith (Mark 11:20-23).

b. If the story was historically accurate, Jesus would have acted like a grouch, an idiot, and perhaps even an evil magician (see above for information on ancient magicians). Just because Jesus was hungry, he miraculously destroyed someone else's tree for failing to provide fruit for him at the wrong time of year!

c. But the story makes complete sense in the literary context of Mark's Gospel.

- 1). Mark has intercalated the destruction of the tree with Jesus's condemnation of the temple, and so the tree and its fate become a symbol for the temple's present condition and ultimate fate. Just as the tree has leaves but no fruit, the temple has beautiful architecture but no spiritual substance. Just as the tree withered only after a time, the temple will be destroyed later (Mark 13:1-2).
- 2). The delay in the destruction of the tree also fits Mark's treatment of faith and miracles. Mark emphasizes that miracles become difficult if there is insufficient faith. In this case, when Peter sees that the fig tree has withered, he at least seems surprised. Jesus responds by insisting that with enough faith one can even throw a mountain into the sea.

d. Therefore, Mark probably composed the story of the cursing of the fig tree and left a clear literary indication that the story was not historical by inserting the detail that it was not the season for figs. Note that Mark may have borrowed the *motif* of the destruction of an unfruitful fig tree from a parable that Jesus actually did tell (Luke 13:6-9).

e. Subsequently, Matthew basically copied Mark's story but left out the disturbing details that it was not the season for figs and that there was a delay in the tree's destruction (Matt. 21:18-21).

f. Luke, apparently realizing that the story was problematic and might not be historical, omitted it.

5. If later tradition not only composed new stories about Jesus, but also composed new parables that ultimately got attributed to Jesus, how are we to distinguish which parables come from Jesus and which do not?

F. The problem of identifying the origin of a parable becomes complicated if only some of the parable goes back to Jesus.

G. Identifying which parts of a parable go back to Jesus becomes crucial if the explicit moral of the story does not, and the original meaning of the parable has been eclipsed by a later interpretation.

H. And the gospels give us good reason to suspect that often the morals to parables were added later.

1. Sometimes in the gospels Jesus tells a parable publicly and then gives a private explanation to the disciples (especially, Mark 4:3-9, 10-20; Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).
2. These private explanations could be a literary device to signal that the interpretation originated later thanks to the inspiration of the risen Christ. It seems unlikely that when Jesus was teaching publicly he was so unclear that private exegesis was necessary. And surely Jesus did not use parables to make his message deliberately unclear so that the crowds would not understand and their sins be forgiven, despite Mark's claim to the contrary (Mark 4:11-12).
3. Sometimes the moral of a parable is explicitly added by the evangelist and, therefore, is only his interpretation (e.g., Luke 18:1).
4. And sometimes an interpretation does not fit the parable well. As noted above, the various interpretations appended to the difficult parable of the dishonest manager seem desperate attempts to salvage a distasteful parable in which a character who goes from bad to worse ends up being commended.

I. Often the gospels do not give us the original context of a parable. We have collections of parables (e.g., Mark 4:1-34, Matthew 13:1-52), and the evangelists apparently either did not know the original settings or omitted them and produced an anthology. And even when the gospels provide a clear context, we cannot know whether the context goes back to Jesus or has been supplied by the evangelist.

J. What the parables meant when Jesus spoke them depends on Jesus's overall teaching and goals which the parables serve, and scholars differ on what these were.

III. Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that competent scholars have differed, often greatly, on the original message of various parables, and, of course, what I will now offer is only my opinion.

IV. I would propose the following methodology:

A. We begin by isolating each parable from its context in the gospel and determine the basic thrust. By beginning this way we will (at least initially) avoid the problems that the details of a parable may have changed on each telling, that the context in the gospel may not be original, and that any "moral" may have been added later.

B. Then we will ask if the thrust of this parable appears in at least one other parable or elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus or the later teaching of the Church, especially of the teaching of the evangelist.

C. If so, then we have a theme that presumably was of some continuing importance.

D. Then we will ask whether this basic thrust fits into what we know of Jesus's life and ministry or whether it fits better into the conditions of the Church after the resurrection.

E. Only when we have concluded that the parable fits the ministry of Jesus will we consider how the parable contributes to our knowledge of him and how that contribution may be relevant to us today.

V. In determining what is the message of a parable we will keep in mind that as literary documents parables have a range of different messages depending on their explicitness. Here is a quick taxonomy using, "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water," to illustrate.

A. Primary messages are things that a literary text clearly states (e.g., Jack and Jill

went up the hill).

B. Secondary messages are things that a literary text clearly implies (e.g., there was a source of water up the hill).

C. Permissible messages are things that are not obviously implied but are highly coherent with what is clearly stated or implied (e.g., Jack and Jill were siblings).

D. Impermissible messages are things that clearly contradict a primary or secondary message (e.g., that there was no hill).

Part 2: Applying the Methodology to the Parables of the Incompetent Manager and the Parable of the Unjust Judge

I. The Parable of the Incompetent Manager comes in two sections.

A. The actual narrative (Luke 16:1-8a).

B. A series of loosely connected morals to the story (Luke 16:8b-13).

II. A summary of the narrative.

A. A rich man hears that his steward is wasting his property.

B. The rich man tells the steward that he is losing his job and to turn in the records.

C. The steward assesses his options and sees that his situation is desperate. He is not strong enough to resort to physical labor and not psychologically prepared to beg.

D. He concocts a scheme so that the boss's debtors will help him after he loses his job.

E. He asks them what they owe, they tell him, he reduces the debt, and enters the reduced debt into the books.

F. The boss commends the steward, because he acted shrewdly.

III. A summary of the various morals of the story.

A. Christians should be as wise in spiritual matters as the manager was in material ones (16:8b).

B. Make friends by giving them money so that later God will reward you after death (16:9).

C. If you are not ethical in using money, how can you expect anyone to trust you in more important (spiritual?) things (16:10-11)?

D. If you are not faithful when you use other people's property, who will give anything to you? (16:12).

E. No one can serve both God and money (16:13).

IV. If we now consider the narrative without the various morals, there are two major problems.

A. Why does the boss commend the steward after the steward has defrauded him?

B. What could be the point of this story in which an incompetent man becomes a crook and is successful?

V. The parable implies that the master commends the steward, because the steward deceives him.

A. The master's original complaint against the steward is mismanaging (literally, "scattering") the property.

B. By implication, the master is not getting the returns that would be expected for the size of the investment.

C. The questions that the steward later asks about the amount of the loans suggests that part of the mismanagement is that the steward has not been keeping any books and, therefore, has no books to give to the boss.

D. By fraudulently reducing the loans and entering the new figures into the records that he gives the boss, the steward convinces the boss that the boss had fewer assets

than he previously thought.

E. The boss concludes that far from mismanaging the property, the steward is getting excellent returns given the (much understated!) size of the loans.

VI. The long series of suggested morals for the story shows that the story itself must go back to Jesus and the morals appeared only later.

A. The various morals seem at best only vaguely related to the narrative. The final moral, that one cannot serve God and money, actually contradicts the narrative, since throughout the story the Steward serves money and yet by doing so he helps others by reducing their debts, thus ironically serving God! Note that Jesus was especially concerned about debt and emphasized the importance of forgiving debt in the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35).

B. The fact that there are so many competing morals implies that there were many attempts to get an edifying message from a seemingly immoral narrative.

C. That the narrative had to be explained rather than simply ignored indicates that it had previously existed and was authoritative.

D. Therefore, the story without the morals must go back to Jesus himself.

VII. Since the dishonest manager is completely successful, the original point of the story must be that he did something commendable and it is a model for Jesus's audience.

VIII. But since the manager is completely selfish throughout the story and proceeds from incompetence to fraud, his behavior is despicable.

IX. However, what is commendable is that the manager is realistic about his dire situation and takes the drastic action that is necessary to save himself. The manager faces the fact that he is too weak to dig and too ashamed to beg. And he turns to crime because there is no other option.

X. Therefore, the point of the story is that total selfishness is acceptable *if you realize what is actually in your self-interest and take drastic action to gain it*, and in the present situation what you must do is heed the warnings of Jesus.

A. Jesus did not proclaim that people should follow him because it was the *decent* thing to do.

B. Instead, people should follow him because it was the only *safe* thing to do. Those who disregarded his message were building their houses on sand and would be swept away when the storm struck (Matt. 7:26-27).

XI. Another parable that centers on a totally selfish character who realizes what is actually in his self-interest and takes appropriate action originally made the same point.

A. The Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) emphasizes that the judge is totally immoral. He cares neither about God nor humans. Note the contrast with Jesus's two great commandments, to love God and to love neighbor (Mark 12:28-34).

B. A widow keeps imploring him to hear her case.

C. For a time the judge ignores her entreaties.

D. But then the judge realizes that it is in his self-interest to hear her case and get rid of her. Otherwise the widow will never stop nagging him and may resort to violence (hit him in the eye).

E. Luke prefaces and concludes the parable with what he takes to be the moral.

1. Luke introduces the parable with the words, "He [Jesus] told to them this parable that it is necessary for them to pray always and not give up."

2. After the end of the narrative, Luke quotes Jesus as saying that God will vindicate those who call upon him (18:7).

F. In Luke's interpretation the heroine of the story is the widow who wears down the judge.

G. However, these are good reasons to doubt Luke's interpretation.

1. In the preface Luke does not even claim that *Jesus* said that the moral of the story was to pray persistently.
2. The end of the conclusion stresses that God will vindicate his chosen ones "speedily," whereas the parable itself stresses that the Judge only decided to hear the widow's case after a considerable time.
3. Luke's gospel in general emphasizes both the effectiveness of prayer (already 1:5-25; e.g., 11:9-13) and that God raises up women who have been put down by humans (already Luke 1:24-25, 1:46-48).
4. Hence, it seems that Luke is imposing his own perspective.
5. I would argue that Luke's imposition is only a permissible message (see above for this category) from the parable. Yes, the persistence and success of the widow are in the story, and it is permissible to apply these to prayer. But the primary point is elsewhere.

H. The main character in the story is the judge.

I. And the despicable judge at least realizes what is actually in his selfish interest and does what is right, namely give justice to the widow.

J. Hence, the basic message is the same as in the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. If one truly realizes what is actually in one's self-interest, one will heed the message of Jesus and do what is right.

XII. Two parables about despicable characters who do not realize what is in their selfish interest and, therefore, come to disaster confirm the analysis given above.

A. In both the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21) and the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31), the main character is totally selfish.

1. The rich fool in the first parable is only concerned about increasing his assets in order to have years of self-indulgence.
2. The rich man, traditionally called Dives, in the second parable lives in luxury and totally ignores Lazarus who is covered with sores and starving at the gate.

B. However, unlike the Dishonest Manager and the Unjust Judge, these two characters do not realize what is actually in their self-interest and come to catastrophe.

1. The rich fool dies before he can enjoy what he has worked for, and someone else who did not work for it will benefit. Note Ecclesiastes 2:18-21.
2. Dives dies and ends up in the fires of Hades and cannot even warn his living brothers not to make the blunder he did.

C. The point of these various parables is the same: Selfishness by itself does not lead to disaster; foolish selfishness does. And by implication, in the present time it is foolish not to accept Jesus's message.

XIII. Appendix: "Must" Ethics Rather than "Should" Ethics

A. In modern times ethical exhortation has often focused on persuading us to do what is right in order to satisfy our "conscience."

B. It is common experience that such exhortation is seldom effective, especially in dealing with a group.

C. Even most individuals are not inclined to make major sacrifices for others outside of their immediate family.

D. Our "consciences" are only a small part of our entire personality.

E. Thanks at least in part to evolution, our strongest individual drive is for self-preservation.

F. Hence, our consciences seldom prevail over massive self-interest, especially since it is easy to dupe our consciences through rationalizations.

- G. On the group level the weakness of emphasizing that the group should make major sacrifices for the welfare of others is even greater.
- H. What human beings most want after meeting their basic needs for survival is approval from others.
- I. By definition, the people we most interact with belong to the groups of which we are part.
- J. Therefore, individuals depend on approval from their groups, and it is extremely hard for individuals to ask a group of which they are part to sacrifice the group's self-interest.
- K. Moreover, it is especially hard for the leaders of a group to recommend collective self-sacrifice (Reinhold Niebuhr).
 - 1. The primary responsibility of the leaders is to look after the group.
 - 2. And if a leader is asking a group to make collective sacrifices, the leader is demanding that other people in the group make sacrifices, a demand which the leader does not have the authority to make.
- L. In practice groups almost never make collective self-sacrifices for the benefit of people outside the group.
- M. And those who try to get the group to act ethically almost always claim (often most implausibly) that doing so will benefit the group itself.
- N. Hence, the Bible does not make ethical demands on the basis of altruism. Instead,
 - 1. The Bible demands that we please God by having compassion on the needy.
 - 2. And since God is the ruler of the universe who repays good and evil both in this life and the life to come, it is always in our ultimate interest, whether individually or collectively, to do what God wants.

How Some of the Parables Expose and Thereby Undermine Conventional Social Structures

- I. A pattern in several parables is that the first part of the story sets up expectations about which character(s) will be rewarded or held up as exemplary.
- II. These expectations reflect the values or prejudices of Jewish society in Jesus's time.
- III. Then there is a reversal and another character whom Jewish society condemns is rewarded or held up as exemplary.
- IV. The result is that the accepted values or prejudices of society are exposed and new attitudes become possible.
- V. Here are the three best examples:
 - A. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-15).
 - 1. The first part of the parable makes us assume that the harvesters who worked all day will receive more than the latecomers, especially since the employer promised the former a denarius and told the latecomers he would pay them only what was right.
 - 2. But then at quitting time, the latecomers get paid just as much.
 - 3. And when those who worked all day complain, the employer responds that he gave them the wage they agreed to and asks why they begrudge his generosity to others.
 - 4. The result is that conventional notions that God must treat those who have been faithful for a lifetime better than the sinners who have only begun to follow Jesus recently are called into question and new attitudes toward the former

sinner become possible.

B. The Parable of the Father and the Two Sons, traditionally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

1. The first part of the parable makes us assume that the father will punish the younger son who behaves both callously and recklessly by taking his share of the future inheritance and going abroad and squandering the money, whereas the father will reward the older son who dutifully stayed home and fulfilled his filial obligations.
2. But when the younger son returns, the father celebrates his son's return by giving a bigger party than he ever did for the older son.
3. The older brother pouts, but then the father points out that the older son should rejoice that his own brother has come home.
4. In the parable the Father represents God.
5. The result is that the Jews who have faithfully served God their whole lives should remember that the sinners who have now begun to follow Jesus are also God's children and their own brothers and sisters and should rejoice at their conversion.
6. The Parable reassures the faithful righteous that they will have their full reward. Note that the Father (God) emphasizes that the older brother will receive the entire remaining inheritance ("all that is mine is yours" [15:31]).
7. But now the parable points out to the faithful righteous that part of their reward is the joy of being in a community in which all its members are fully included and safe.

C. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35).

1. In the first part of the parable, a Jewish traveler is assaulted by bandits who leave him naked and half dead on the road.
2. Then a priest and a Levite (an assistant priest) pass by without helping, perhaps because they cannot tell whether the traveler is dead or not and touching a dead man would make them ritually impure.
3. A Jewish audience hearing the parable would naturally assume that the next person who comes on the scene would be a Jewish layman and would provide the needed assistance.
4. But then the parable shocks the audience by having a Samaritan arrive and provide exemplary assistance, even taking the victim to an inn and paying for his care.
5. Jews in the time of Jesus hated Samaritans and regarded them as unethical. In John's Gospel, the enemies of Jesus insult him as having a demon and being a "Samaritan" (John 8:48).
6. The parable exposes Jewish prejudice against Samaritans as unjustified and invites Jews to regard Samaritans as friends.
7. The invitation to regard Samaritans as friends was in keeping with Jesus's ultimate goal of reuniting the twelve tribes of Israel in his new kingdom (Matt. 19:28). The Samaritans were the surviving remnant of the ten northern tribes.
8. We may note in passing that Luke clearly understood what the primary message of the parable was.
 - a. Luke introduces the parable with the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself and a question from a Jewish Lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?"
 - b. Immediately after the parable Jesus asks who actually was neighbor to

the Jewish traveler who was assaulted by the bandits. The Jewish lawyer has to respond that it was the one who showed mercy, even though the lawyer apparently still cannot acknowledge that the exemplary neighbor was a Samaritan.

c. Luke's point is clear: Samaritans are the neighbors of Jews, and Jews must, therefore, fulfill God's commandment by loving them.

9. Of course, it is true that another message of the parable is that we should imitate the Samaritan's kindness to a wounded traveler.

a. Luke makes this point explicitly when he ends the section with Jesus telling the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

b. The historical Jesus clearly assumed the point, because if the Samaritan's behavior was not exemplary, the Samaritan would not be a deserving friend and neighbor.

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 his followers from each other on the basis of present righteousness or honor.

E. Separating people on the basis of their wealth.

F. 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 and noticeable 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. Jesus also 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).

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 Judgment 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).
 - C. Former sinners who have received God's forgiveness will love God more than those people who have always been righteous. Those to whom much have been forgiven love much (Luke 7:41-48).
- VII. To overcome division among his own disciples over who was most righteous, Jesus
- A. Gave commandments that only pointed in a direction and could not be taken literally (e.g., "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off" [Mark 9:43]). Hence, it was impossible to conclude who was following the rules and who was not.
 - B. Emphasized that what was most important was not external conformity to rules but what is in one's heart (i.e., in the hidden core of one's identity).
 - C. Condemned flaunting piety to gain social prestige. Those who engaged in ostentatious alms giving, prayer, and fasting would forfeit any reward from God (Matt. 6:1-6).
 - D. Emphasized that those who are more righteous demonstrate their goodness by supporting weaker disciples.
 - E. Taught that it takes more courage and determination for weaker disciples to make spiritual progress than for stronger ones.
 - 1. In both the somewhat similar parables of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30) and the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) the more capable characters have no trouble working, taking risks, and making great progress.
 - 2. By implication, it is easier for the spiritually advanced to continue to grow spiritually.
 - 3. In both parables it is apparently the character who has the least ability who succumbs to the temptation to seek ease and security by leaving things as they are and is punished for doing so.
 - 4. By implication, it takes greater virtue for the spiritually immature to continue on the difficult path of spiritual progress.
- VIII. To overcome division among his own disciples over who was most honorable, Jesus advised against competing for public honor, a practice which was central to his culture.
- A. In many modern cultures, including my own, people primarily compete for money. The goal is become richer than others and flaunt the wealth to impress.
 - B. In Jesus's pre-industrial culture the amount of resources was fixed, and becoming rich was not admired, because if someone got more, someone else would end up with less.
 - C. Instead, people in Jesus's environment constantly struggled to have more public honor, and since the available honor was finite, to gain more honor meant depriving someone else of it.
 - D. Of course, such competition was divisive.
 - E. To unite his disciples, Jesus advised against struggling for honor.
 - 1. He condemned scribes who sought the most prestigious places in the synagogues and banquets (Mark 12:38-39).
 - 2. He advised his followers to take the lowest place at a wedding celebration and allow the host to invite them to move higher (Luke 14:8-10).
 - 3. He rebuked his disciples when they quarreled over who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-35).

- IX. 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).
- X. 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 (Mark 3:13-19).
 - B. Since the leaders would have authority in the kingdom, they would set the tone for the community as a whole.
 - 1. Ideally, the leaders would be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” and by their exemplary lives inspire others to imitate them and to praise God for the leaders' goodness (Matt. 5:13-16).
 - 2. But there was the dire danger that the leaders would be like conventional people with power and thereby undermine Jesus's vision of a different and better society.
 - C. Therefore, Jesus seems to have spent much time and energy privately training his closest disciples.
 - D. He stressed to the leaders of his movement that they 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, especially 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 diseased, the disabled, and the demon possessed (in modern medicine, those with severe mental or neurological disorders).
 - c. Despised sinners. Jesus insisted that his primary mission was to save sinners (Mark 2:17).
 - d. Women in general.
 - 1). Jesus was concerned about the plight of divorced women (see above).
 - 2). He felt that the well being of women took precedence over menstrual taboos. When a woman suffering from chronic bleeding touched him seeking healing, he commended her for her courageous faith rather than rebuking her for making him ritually impure (Mark 5:25-34).
 - 3). Contrary to conventional practice, Jesus even had women disciples who accompanied him in his travels (Mark 15:40-41, Luke 8:1-3). Since Jesus was not married, the presence of women in his entourage probably inspired hostile gossip that he was promiscuous.
 - 4). Jesus's saying about becoming a eunuch for the kingdom (Matt. 19:12) probably originally meant giving up patriarchal privilege (William Countryman). The saying is in the hyperbolic

and shocking style of Jesus and must go back to him. Later tradition stressed that the saying was only for a few people and referred to voluntary celibacy. But Jesus never elsewhere recommends celibacy. I suspect that the statement was for men in general and was a plea to give up oppressing women.

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

1). Children had low status and no rights in the ancient world, and parents were supposed to discipline them by beating them frequently (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). Here the primary meaning was not to seek status and power. But I suspect that a secondary or at least permissible meaning was also to have a childlike trust in God and enthusiasm for life in the kingdom.

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

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

a. 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).

b. 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

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

2). Used their interpretations to absolve themselves from any sacrifice.

3). Imposed heavy burdens on others, particularly the lowly.

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

3. 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).

XI. Excursus: Jesus and the Pharisees.

A. Modern liberal scholars, sensitive to anti-Semitism, stress that

1. The Pharisees were not as bad as the gospels portray.

2. The aggressive attacks on them in the gospels do not come from Jesus but from the Early Church which the Pharisees persecuted and ultimately expelled from the Jewish community.

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," that is educated males who were recognized as having the

authority to interpret the Mosaic Law.

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).

G. Today we should take the criticism of the Pharisees in the gospels not primarily as a past perspective on a particular group but as a warning of what always tends to happen to individuals and groups who make laws for others.

1. In all times and places people who make rules claim that they are primarily concerned about the well being of everyone or even claim that they are primarily concerned about those most in need.
2. In practice, however, those who make the rules give special consideration to their own needs and the needs of others who have power.
3. Consequently, the resulting laws favor the special interests of those who are already privileged.
4. It is the responsibility of the followers of Jesus to imitate him by denouncing this hypocrisy and press for genuine justice and mercy, especially for those most in need.

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. The theme pervades the material attributed to Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and, at least occasionally, appears in John.

A. The kingdom is what most of his parables explain. "The kingdom of God is like . . ." (e.g., Matt. 13:44-48).

B. The model prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples asks for the coming of the kingdom (Luke 11:2-4).

C. Mark can summarize Jesus's preaching as "The kingdom of God has drawn near" (Mark 1:16).

D. The kingdom is not a major theme in other early Christian writings (e.g., Paul's Letters).

E. The emphasis on a kingdom would not have originated in the Early Church. The Early Church, facing possible persecution from Roman officials, was anxious to avoid any appearance of sedition.

II. There are two alternate models for what Jesus had in mind for his "kingdom."

A. One model would be a non-political religious association much like a modern denomination and Jesus would be head.

B. The other model, of course, would take the term kingdom literally and insist that Jesus had a political agenda and intended to become a regular earthly king.

III. Several arguments can be made for the non-political, "denominational" model.

A. Jesus's own movement never gained political power and had no resources to attempt to do so.

B. The word "kingdom" could have been a metaphor for something that was not political.

C. There were Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees, who were not overtly political.

D. In John's Gospel Jesus insists that his kingdom is not the normal type, not a kingdom "of this world" with soldiers who would fight for Jesus (John 18:36).

E. After the death of Jesus his followers certainly were a non-political movement.

They made no effort to gain political power but instead peacefully lived under Roman

rule. The New Testament epistles even insist that Christians should honor their Pagan rulers (Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17).

F. And many modern followers of Jesus continue living peacefully under secular governments, make no effort to gain political power, and emphasize that Christians should do their civic duty, including respecting government officials.

G. Probably the majority of Christians today prefer to think of Jesus as a non-political figure.

IV. Nevertheless, I believe that historically Jesus intended to become an earthly king ruling over an earthly kingdom, albeit a different sort of one.

A. In evaluating what historically Jesus was seeking, we must focus on what the situation was during his own lifetime, and the apolitical church whether immediately after the crucifixion or in modern democratic societies was a response to a different situation.

B. A political kingdom with a regular king and courtiers was the kind of government that Israel had for a thousand years.

1. In the very early history of Israel there was little central government and charismatic “judges” exercised temporary regional leadership.
2. But beginning around 1,000 BCE monarchy was the norm while an independent Israel or Judah survived.
3. Subsequently, foreign kings (actually, emperors) ruled over Israel until the Maccabean revolt.
4. The Maccabees were priests but ruled like a king and ultimately took the title.
5. Then Roman domination with its emperors began.

C. The phrase “kingdom of God” implies God ruling through a divinely chosen earthly king, and was the ideal form of government that the Jewish Scriptures remembered and looked forward to.

1. The Scriptures emphasized that God chose David and his successors to be the kings of Israel forever (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:8-16).
2. When nevertheless the davidic dynasty collapsed, the Scriptures looked forward to its restoration (e.g., Jeremiah 23:5-6, Ezekiel 37:15-28).

V. Jesus chose twelve disciples for special leadership and informed them that he would one day be Israel’s king, and they would be his courtiers.

A. Probably early in his public ministry Jesus chose twelve men for a special leadership role, and this choice implied the restoration of the Israelite monarchy under a new king.

1. The number twelve looked back to the twelve tribes of the ideal Israel.
2. At least in theory the founders of the tribes were the twelve sons of Jacob who later gained the name “Israel.”
3. King David, by tradition the ideal monarch, had ruled over the twelve tribes.
4. By appointing a new Twelve Jesus demonstrated his royal authority over them.

B. Perhaps a little later Jesus explicitly revealed to the Twelve that he would be a political 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.

1. After Judas betrayed Jesus, the Church would not have invented a saying in which Jesus appears to grant a throne to him. At the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives a missionary commission to the “Eleven” (Matt. 28:16-20).

2. In line with Jesus's emphasis that leaders must act as servants, the quote about the Twelve does not say that they would rule over the tribes but "judge" them, that is, bring justice.
3. 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).

VI. There is considerable evidence that Jesus thought that his kingdom would only come slowly.

A. The quotation given above 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.

B. Jesus said that the kingdom would come in power only within the *lifetime* of some of his disciples (Mark 9:1).

C. A number of the parables of growth strongly suggest that the realization of Jesus's kingship would take a lot of time. The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:2-8) and the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat (Matt. 13:24-30), tell of the planting of seeds, a series of subsequent problems, and ultimately a harvest (cf. John 12:24). Presumably, the problems imply a considerable passage of time.

VII. The passage of time is especially evident in the Parable of the Seed that Grows by Itself (Mark 4:26-29).

VIII. A summary of the parable.

- A. Introduction: "The Kingdom of God is like . . . "
- B. A person planted a seed.
- C. Without his further assistance, the seed went through the stages of sprouting, growth, blade, ear, and grain.
- D. Then the person immediately cuts the grain because the harvest has come.

IX. Structurally, the parable contrasts the gradual, mysterious, and yet wholly predictable, growth of the seed with the suddenness of the harvesting "immediately."

X. In its *present form* the parable fits perfectly the period when years had passed since Jesus's resurrection, the Church had grown, and, despite high expectations, Jesus had not yet returned but his sudden return was still awaited.

A. Elsewhere in the New Testament a harvest is a metaphor for the final judgment (Matt. 13:36-43, Rev. 14:14-20).

B. The slow growth of the seed in the parable can represent the growth of the Church over a long period since the resurrection of Jesus.

C. The sudden harvest reflects the hope for Jesus's imminent return, a hope we see in various early Christian documents (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

XI. Nevertheless, I think that the bulk of the parable probably does go back to Jesus, and only "immediately" was added later.

A. Jesus told a number of parables about growing seeds.

B. A theme in at least the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-8) and the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt. 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke:13:18-19) is the contrast between small beginnings and great ends. Both parables must go back to Jesus.

1. The Parable of the Sower has a later, private explanation (Mark 4:14-20) which fits a subsequent period and suggests that the parable which Jesus told needed updating. It was only in a later period that persecution arose and some deserted the Church to pursue wealth.

2. The Parable of the Mustard Seed comes in two different forms, and this dual witness suggests antiquity (John Meier).

C. Such parables were originally a response to doubts that Jesus's pathetically small and weak movement could ever amount to much.

D. The seed growing by itself also originally illustrated Jesus's claim that the small beginnings would lead to great conclusions.

E. "Immediately" is one of Mark's favorite words, and he could easily have added it to stress his hope that Jesus would return soon.

F. Jesus certainly believed that there would be a final resurrection and judgment and warned people to live in light of this future. He just did not insist that these final events would happen "immediately."

G. Harvesting is a natural image for the completion of all things, and the image of a harvest occurs in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30) which I believe goes back to Jesus.

XII. If this analysis is correct, the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself illustrates Jesus's hope that he would become an earthly king, probably after a prolonged rise to power. The parable emphasizes the stages of growth and the passage of time between them, "first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." The point seems clear: Only after many progressive steps and a lot of time will the kingdom fully come. But ultimately Jesus will benevolently reign over Judea, raising up the the poor, making people equal, and preparing all for the final resurrection and judgment.

XIII. 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 enthusiastic crowds, Herod Antipas arrested and executed him.

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

3. Especially Jesus's miracles inspired dangerous public acclaim and speculation about who Jesus thought he was and what his future intentions might be (Mark 6:14-16). Apparently, Jesus sometimes had to withdraw quickly to prevent the crowds from overreacting (e.g., John 6:14-15).

4. The story of Herod the Great slaughtering the infants in Bethlehem after he heard a prediction of the birth of a new king (Matt. 2:1-16) is probably not historical, but it does reflect how rulers in the time of Jesus responded to the possibility of a new claimant to the throne.

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).

XIV. 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.

XV. 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.
- XVI. There were at least three ways that Jesus might have considered gaining royal power.
- A. He could have considered leading a revolt.
 1. The Maccabees had successfully revolted against Greek rule two centuries before and become Israel's rulers, ultimately adopting the title "king."
 2. Various messiahs before and after Jesus's ministry unsuccessfully fought against Roman rule.
 - B. He could have hoped for an apocalyptic intervention by God.
 1. The Jewish Bible celebrated the miraculous intervention of God in the past to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and give them a homeland in Canaan.
 2. Apocalyptic documents predicting an imminent divine intervention to transform the world and save the Jews were common during the first century.
 3. In the gospels Jesus himself talks about his own future apocalyptic triumph, as the coming son of humanity (see above).
 4. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the mainstream of biblical scholarship has held that Jesus entertained apocalyptic expectations.
 - C. He could have hoped to persuade the Romans to appoint him to be king. Both before and after Jesus's ministry the Romans appointed Jews to be client rulers in Israel.
- XVII. There were problems with each of these alternatives.
- A. Leading a revolt seemed hopeless and unethical.
 1. Jesus had no political or military resources.
 2. Both before and after the time of Jesus all Jewish revolts against Roman power ended in disaster.
 3. Jesus in the gospels speaks against the use of violence (e.g., Matt. 26:52).
 - B. It is doubtful that Jesus had any knowledge of apocalypticism.
 1. The Bible that Jesus knew consisted of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.
 2. With the exception of Daniel, the apocalypses were esoteric documents which a carpenter from an obscure village would not read.
 3. Jesus probably did not rely on Daniel.
 - a. Daniel was not part of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, and Jesus would have considered it less authoritative.
 - b. Jesus may not have even have known that the book of Daniel existed. In the gospels the only times that Jesus quotes Daniel is during the apocalyptic discourse (Matt. 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27) and in his trial before the high priest (Daniel 7:13, Mark 14:62, Matt. 26:64). The authenticity of both quotations is questionable.
 - 1). The apocalyptic discourse predicts future events, and the evangelists have clearly adjusted the events to correspond with what historically had happened after the crucifixion and with what was now expected to happen. What had happened after the crucifixion was the persecution of the Church which the discourse emphasizes. What was expected to happen was the imminent return of the risen Christ as the son of humanity, a return that the quotation from Daniel corroborates.
 - 2). The trial before the high priest was not open to the public, and it is doubtful that the evangelists had detailed knowledge of the proceedings. The quotation from Daniel climaxes Jesus's testimony, and it is easy to imagine Mark adding it, and Matthew

and Luke copied Mark.

4. Jesus's predictions in the gospels of his own apocalyptic triumph reflect knowledge of the resurrection and come from the Early Church, not from the historical Jesus (see above).

C. The Romans only appointed Jewish royalty to high office, and in the end the Romans executed Jesus.

XVIII. I will now argue that the least improbable of these three alternatives of how Jesus planned to gain power is the last, namely that the historical Jesus hoped for a political appointment from the Romans.

The Final 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 instead of soliciting monetary donations, they were to be guests in people's houses.

C. Of course, Jesus knew that many who would hear the preaching usually went to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals.

II. Jesus traveled 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 publicly 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 occupying troops stationed in the city.

C. About the same time when Jesus was there, the Romans arrested a violent 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 and his advisers had already come to this conclusion before Jesus entered the city (John 11:45-50).

- VI. If the Roman authorities concluded that Jesus was about to lead a revolt, they would certainly arrest him.
- VII. 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. 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.
- VIII. Given the inflammatory situation, Jesus had to make it immediately clear what his intentions were and ideally justify them by appealing to scripture.
- IX. On his arrival in Jerusalem Jesus engaged in two carefully planned, highly public, and extremely aggressive acts.
- A. He arranged to obtain a colt and approached Jerusalem 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) and declared that God intended the temple to be "a house of prayer for all nations but you [presumably the high priest and his family] have made it a refuge [literally, a cave] for bandits" (Mark 11:17).
 - C. There is no question that these two acts occurred, since they are independently attested in the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John. Note that the wording and details in John's version differ from Mark's.
 - D. And it is very likely that Jesus's declaration was close to the form quoted above from Mark.
 - 1. Jesus surely needed to say something to explain his highhanded attack on the Temple, and given the circumstances, whatever he said would be highly memorable.
 - 2. Mark is the earliest written tradition of Jesus's words.
 - 3. Not surprisingly, Matthew and Luke who wrote long after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans omitted that the Temple was "for all the nations" (Matt. 21:13, Luke 19:46).
- X. Both the royal approach to Jerusalem and the protest in the temple consciously invoked scripture and were a signal that he was not a military threat to Roman rule.
- A. The approach on a colt fulfilled the prediction in Zechariah 9:9 of the coming of Israel's king, as both Matthew's and John's Gospels explicitly state (Matt. 21:4-5, John 12:14-15). Just after the quote, Zechariah continues that this king will end war and bring "peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:10), and Jesus did not have an armed guard.
 - 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. Later 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.

C. The words, "My [God's] house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations" were a quotation from Isaiah (Isa. 56:7) and made it clear that the Romans were welcome in the temple.

D. The implication was obvious: Roman rule was God's will, and the Jews must accept it peacefully and avoid catastrophe.

XI. 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 Israel" which was open only to Jewish males.
4. A final court and 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 nations (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11:17), and Gentiles were, virtually by definition, impure.

XII. 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 from the half shekel temple tax required for all adult Jewish males (Exod. 30:11-16, Matt. 17:24-27), from voluntary donations, and from the sale of sacrificial animals.
2. Much of this wealth was from the pious poor, a fact Jesus emphasized by pointing out a widow who gave her last coin and insisting that because of her poverty she had given more than anyone else (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).

XIII. 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.

XIV. As intended, Jesus's bold acts made him a celebrity and curious crowds came to hear him.

XV. Jesus hoped that he could gain enough public support that with God's help the Romans would consider making him king of Judea (and Samaria?) probably after a slow rise to power.

A. Before 6 CE Rome had appointed the Jewish kings, Herod the Great to rule over

Israel and then Archelaus, to rule Judea and Samaria, 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. Presumably, Jesus was aware that earlier in Jewish history the Persian Empire had given both Ezra and Nehemiah authority to renew Judaism, and God could use the Romans to appoint him to do the same.

D. Jesus had already signaled that he was not opposed to Roman rule.

E. As a descendant of David Jesus had at least one political credential.

F. 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 and punish those who oppressed them.

G. 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 which would end in catastrophe. Such a revolt did occur forty years later.

H. 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).

XVI. 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 of 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.

C. Christians are called to political involvement, even seeking high office, if political involvement can lead to a more just and merciful society.

XVII. 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 without antagonizing Rome (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

1. Was a little ambiguous, since all things belong to God. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1).

2. Nevertheless, like other sayings of Jesus, it did point in a certain direction, and this direction validated both Jewish piety and Roman rule.

- a. Rome had a legitimate sphere of authority.

- b. Nevertheless, that authority must respect all the prerogatives of God.

- c. In other words, 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,

1. Affirmed that there would be a final judgment in which those who rejected him would suffer.

2. Jesus was not expecting God to overthrow Rome before the final judgment.
- C. Which was the most important commandment? Jesus stressed that love was most important. By implication
 1. Purity should not be observed when to do so would be unloving.
 2. Rome had nothing to fear from *love*, especially, since Jesus taught that people must even love their enemies (Matt. 5:44-45).
- 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.
 3. This new kind of king need not be a threat to Rome.
- 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 (Mark 12:38-40), thus emphasizing his
 1. Solidarity with the poor
 2. Loyalty to the prophetic tradition of social justice
 3. Condemnation of hypocrisy in religious leaders
 4. Hostility to the high priestly establishment.

XVIII. 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. But there was no movement to champion elevating Jesus to kingship.

XIX. 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.

XX. 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

1. The owner represents God and the tenants are Israel. Note that the Jewish Bible insists that God gave to the Israelites their land, and a symbol for Israel is a vine (e.g., Psalm 80) or a vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7).
2. The slaves are the Hebrew prophets who demanded righteousness, and fruit in the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus symbolizes righteousness (Matt. 3:8, 7:15-23).
3. 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.

E. We may also note that Jesus getting killed does not occur in any other parable and was not a continuing theme in his teaching.

1. Instead, Jesus's prediction of his own violent death was a late development after Jesus's hopes for a political appointment failed.

2. Later the evangelists, looking back at Jesus through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection, had Jesus earlier keep announcing that he would be killed.

3. These earlier predictions of martyrdom are mostly in private teaching to the disciples (Mark 8:27-33, 9:2-13, 10:32-34), and this secrecy may be a literary acknowledgment by the evangelists that the predictions are theological rather than historical. The violent death of Jesus was always part of *God's* plan.

4. Of course, any attempt to become king was highly risky, and historically Jesus may have warned his disciples well in advance of the *possibility* of him being killed and the passion predictions in the gospels may reflect this warning.

XXI. Having finally concluded that he would certainly be killed, 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 ultimately came to believe.

D. The gospels which are primarily theological and confessional documents introduce the theme of atonement earlier in the narrative than it actually did in Jesus's life.

XXII. After it became clear that Jesus's hopes for a political appointment had failed and he soon would be killed, Judas decided to betray him.

A. Judas was one the Twelve (Mark 3:14-19, John 6:70-71).

B. Jesus had promised that the Twelve would share in his political rule (Matt. 19:28), and Judas came to Jerusalem expecting that promise to be fulfilled.

C. When it became clear that Jesus would be killed, Judas himself must have felt betrayed.

D. Moreover, if the authorities killed Jesus, they might also attack his disciples.

E. In response to this situation, Judas secretly went to the authorities and offered to inform them when Jesus could be arrested quietly without the danger of a public uproar.

F. The Early Church would not have invented the embarrassing detail that one of Jesus's closest followers betrayed him.

XXIII. To prepare his followers to continue his mission after his death, Jesus secretly arranged a solemn farewell meal.

A. He reserved a suitable room and even arranged for a signal so that the disciples could find the house (Mark 14:12-16).

B. 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), and Paul personally knew Peter and John (Gal. 2:9) who were at the meal.

XXIV. The meal may not have been the Passover Feast, but it certainly had a Passover atmosphere.

A. The gospels disagree over whether the Last Supper was a Passover feast. Note that in Jewish reckoning the day ends at sunset and the next day begins at twilight.

1. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that the Last Supper was the Passover meal (e.g., Mark 14:12).

2. John's Gospel records that Jesus was tried and crucified on the day before Passover (John 18:28, 19:31).

B. Historically, John is probably correct.

1. It is unlikely that a trial and execution could take place on the holiday (cf. Acts 12:4).

2. If Jesus instituted the Eucharist on the Passover (see below), the Eucharist would subsequently only have been celebrated once a year (Dom Gregory Dix).

3. By making the Last Supper a Passover meal, the Early Church may have been expressing the theological point that for Christians the Eucharist is the fulfillment and replacement of the Passover.

C. Nevertheless, Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, and since the Passover was very near, the Last Supper must have had a Passover feel.

XXV. From the various accounts of the Last Supper, it is highly likely 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 14:18-21, 24).

1. A biblical covenant is a solemn commitment which establishes or deepens a relationship.

2. In the gospel accounts Jesus announces that one of the people present will betray him (e.g., Mark 14:18).

3. Each of the disciples wonders if he is the one (e.g., Mark 14:19).

4. I think that historically Jesus was warning the disciples that any one of them might betray him by abandoning the proclamation of the kingdom.

5. Of course, later it became clear that Judas would at least be the first to betray Jesus, and, it is not surprising that both Matthew's and John's gospels have Jesus indicate that Judas is the disciple about whom he was speaking (Matt. 26:25, John 13:25-27).

6. However, I doubt that at the Last Supper Jesus already knew about Judas's coming betrayal.

7. Since Jesus had already predicted a period of tribulation, the danger that disciples would abandon their mission would be great.

C. He said that the bread and the wine would be his body and blood (e.g., Mark 14:22-24).

- XXVI. 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.
- XXVII. Eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood was paradoxical and highly offensive.
- A. Eating Jesus's body sounded like cannibalism.
 - B. Drinking blood was even more disgusting.
 1. The Jewish Scriptures repeatedly forbid the consumption of blood on the grounds that the life of an animal or human resides in the blood (already Gen. 9:4, e.g., Deut. 12:23-25).
 2. The prohibition of consuming blood was an important part of everyday life, since it restricted diet.
 - C. John's Gospel underlines the offensiveness of eating Jesus's flesh and drinking his blood and has disciples desert in response (John 6:51-66).
- XXVIII. Like other "hard sayings" of Jesus, eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood in a sacrament
- A. Pointed in a certain direction but could not be taken literally.
 - B. Gave his disciples a sense of unity and equality (since all would share in the same "body"), as Paul would later point out (1 Cor. 10:16-17).
 - C. Invited continuing reflection.
- XXIX. My own reflection is
- A. Jesus was saying that whenever his disciples renew their covenant by eating his body and drinking his blood, they are
 1. Making their bodies his body.
 2. Receiving his very life.
 3. Pledging to be his continuing physical presence in this world.
 - B. Jesus was initiating an atoning ritual.
 1. Jesus during his ministry had exercised the authority to forgive sin.
 2. He had at least suggested that this authority would be given to his disciples as members of the new humanity.
 3. The most important liturgy in the Temple was the rites of the Day of Atonement which included using blood to cleanse sin (Lev. 16).
 4. Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple.
 5. By instituting a ritual that would make himself present through blood, it seems likely that Jesus was providing a substitute for the atonement rites of the Temple.
 6. Apparently, Matthew agreed with this analysis, because he added the words "for the forgiveness of sin" to the words Jesus speaks about his sacramental blood (Matt. 26:28).
- XXX. 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.
- XXXI. Luke's material referred to above occurs in other contexts in Matthew and Mark (Matt.

19:28, 20:24-28; Mark 9:34) and may not accurately record what Jesus said at the Last Supper.

XXXII. However, I believe that Luke correctly underlines who Jesus was and what being faithful to the Eucharistic covenant requires.

XXXIII. 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 Jesus 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 of 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.

XXXIV. The arrest and priestly trial of Jesus.

A. After the Supper, Jesus accompanied by his disciples went to a public park.

B. There he engaged in prolonged prayer.

C. He asked God to spare him from suffering and death. Note that the Church would not have subsequently invented Jesus's request to be spared. The Church taught that the atoning sufferings of Jesus were part of God's eternal plan to save the world (already 1 Cor. 15:3).

D. Nevertheless, despite his plea to be spared, Jesus did not flee but prayed that God's will be done.

E. An armed company from the high priest and led by Judas arrived, arrested Jesus, and took him to the high priest's residence.

F. 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 and attacked wealth, and the high priest's influence depended in part on his superior purity and his riches.

5. If Jesus succeeded in becoming king, he would be over the high priest, and the Romans would consider him rather than the high priest to be the spokesman for the Jewish community.

6. And the Romans were at least tolerating Jesus.

G. The high priest conducted some sort of interrogation.

1. The gospel accounts differ on particulars.

2. Since the trial was not public, the evangelists may not have known the details.

H. Nevertheless, I see no reason to doubt the gospel record (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.

XXXV. 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 handed Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, with a request for execution.

C. A crowd mostly consisting of Jews who resented Roman rule and Jesus's support of it gathered.

D. Pilate had no desire to execute Jesus.

1. As a Pagan, Pilate had little sympathy for the Jewish Temple.

2. Jesus had made it clear that he had no designs against Roman rule. Jesus had denounced violence against Rome by condemning the Temple as a stronghold for bandits (i.e., Jewish revolutionaries) and declaring that the Temple was for all nations.

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.

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

F. However, as he did so, the Jewish crowd threatened to riot (e.g., Matt. 27:24) and to denounce Pilate to Rome for tolerating a royal pretender (John 19:12).

G. At this point Pilate had to give in.

1. Denouncing Pilate to Rome could easily lead to the end of his tenure as governor. Ultimately Rome deposed Pilate after the Samaritans denounced him to Rome for perpetrating a massacre (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII, 85).

2. In the incendiary atmosphere of Passover, any riot could quickly escalate into a full scale revolt.

H. To placate the crowd, Pilate reluctantly released the popular revolutionary, Barabbas, had Jesus scourged, and ordered his crucifixion.

I. 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 Jewish king.

2. Ordered the execution of two bandits (i.e., revolutionaries against Rome) alongside of Jesus to make the execution of Jesus look like part of a crackdown against revolutionaries.

3. As was customary, directed that the charge be posted. It read, “King of the Jews” (e.g., Mark 15:26).

J. Then the Roman soldiers abusively mocked Jesus over his royal claims, escorted him to the execution site, and crucified him.

XXXVI. The death and burial of Jesus.

A. Jesus was crucified around “the third hour” (9:00 A.M.; Mark 15:25) and died around “the ninth hour” (3:00 P.M.; Mark 15:34-37).

B. Historically, it is unlikely that Jesus said much while he suffered.

1. The gospels record that Jesus said various edifying things while on the cross,

and these “seven last words” do cohere with Jesus's teaching and behavior. For example,

- a. Jesus praying for God to forgive those who crucified him (Luke 23:24) is a striking illustration of his teaching that people are to pray for those who abuse them (Matt. 5:44).
- b. Similarly, Jesus entrusting the care of his mother to the “Beloved Disciple” (John 19:26-27) is a striking illustration of his concern for women and his mandate at the Last Supper that his disciples take over his ministry and be his “body” in the world.
2. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that historically Jesus spoke the seven last words.
 - a. Six of the seven last words appear in only one gospel, and the seventh Matthew copied from Mark (Mark 15:34, Matt. 27:46).
 - b. It is doubtful that a crucified person could think clearly or talk much.
 - c. Instead, it is more likely that once again we have illustrations of later Christians imagining things about Jesus that were consistent with what historically he said and did.
- C. I believe that Jesus did call on God by saying, “Eli,” which in Hebrew means “my God” (Mark 15:34).
 1. “Eli” was subsequently interpreted
 - a. Either as an appeal for the prophet Elijah to come and save Jesus (Mark 15:35). According to the Jewish Scriptures, Elijah ascended bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:1-12) and was to return just before the “Day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5).
 - b. Or “Eli” was understood as the opening of Psalm 22 in which the Psalmist asks why God has forsaken him (Mark 15:34; Edward Hobbess).
 2. Since Jesus's hope for a political appointment from Rome had failed and yet he still believed that God would somehow vindicate him, perhaps “Eli” expressed both that disappointment and hope.
 3. But we will never know. Jesus said no more and died with a loud, inarticulate cry (Mark 15:37).
- D. To ensure that Jesus was dead, a soldier pricked his body with a spear (John 19:34-37).
 1. If Jesus was still alive, he would at least have flinched involuntarily.
 2. He did not.
 3. John's Gospel insists that the piercing was observed by an eyewitness known to the Church.
 4. Later speculation that Jesus survived the crucifixion, appeared to the disciples, and this appearance led to belief that Jesus had risen from the dead has no basis in historical fact (see below for more discussion).
- E. Jesus was 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) and caused a public uproar that could easily lead to violence.
 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).

XXXVII. (Excursus) One solution to the problem of the crucifixion and subsequent anti-Semitism.

- A. The gospels place the blame for the execution of Jesus primarily on the "Jews."
- B. The gospel accounts of the crucifixion have incited Christians down through the centuries to persecute the Jews as "Christ killers."
- C. There are several obvious objections to appealing to the crucifixion to justify this persecution.
 - 1. Jesus and his followers were also Jews.
 - 2. Blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus did not fit well with the Church's claim that it was God's will that Jesus die to atone for sin.
 - 3. After Christians gained political power, blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus was a convenient excuse for seizing the wealth of the Jewish community.
 - 4. The Jews whom the church persecuted were not responsible for Jesus's death which happened long before they were born.
 - 5. Persecuting anyone is contrary to Jesus's teaching that his followers should love everyone (e.g., Matt. 5:43-48) and forgive others, since God has forgiven us (Matt. 6:12-15).
- D. Liberal scholars who are anxious to get beyond the evils of the past tend to argue that the Romans were primarily responsible for the death of Jesus.
 - 1. The evangelists did not want to antagonize Roman authorities, since they could persecute the Church.
 - 2. Therefore, the evangelists needed to shift the blame onto the Jews who were widely disliked in the Roman world and, especially after the failed revolt in the years 66-70, were seen as disloyal to Rome.
 - 3. To shift the blame, the evangelists rewrote history by claiming that Pilate wanted to release Jesus, whereas in reality, Pilate viewed Jesus's messianic activity as a threat and executed him to preserve Roman power.
- E. In part the liberals are correct.
 - 1. The Romans did find Jesus guilty of treason and crucified him.
 - 2. It was indeed politically expedient for the Early Church to minimize Roman responsibility for the death of Jesus.
 - 3. Many of the details in the gospel narratives that exonerate the Romans and shift blame onto the Jews cannot be historically accurate. For example, in Matthew's account of the Roman trial Pilate even washes his hands claiming to be innocent of Jesus's blood, and the Jewish crowd responds, "His blood is upon us and on our children" (Matt. 27:24-25). These details in Matthew cannot be historical.
 - a. They do not appear in Mark, Luke, or John.
 - b. Whatever Pilate's personal feelings about the legal proceedings may have been, he could not publicly declare that he was ordering the crucifixion of an innocent person.
 - c. The official charge was treason against Rome, not violating Jewish law against blasphemy.
 - d. The statement that Jesus's blood was on the Jewish crowd's *children* is a prophecy of the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem which Matthew believed was God's punishment for the execution of Jesus and the Jewish persecution of the Early Church (Matt. 21:37-41, 22:7).
- F. Nevertheless, according to my reconstruction, two Jewish groups were primarily

responsible for Jesus's execution.

1. The high priest and his supporters rightly regarded Jesus as a threat to their power, found him guilty of a capital crime, and pressured Pilate to execute him.
2. A nationalistic Jewish crowd which resented Jesus's tolerance for Roman rule forced Pilate to execute Jesus in order to avoid a riot. Note that to placate them further Pilate released the Jewish revolutionary Barabbas.

G. However, classical Judaism was not in any way to blame.

1. During the lifetime of Jesus, Jews were divided over whether it was best to engage in violent resistance to Roman rule or live in peace.
2. Jesus was not the only important Jewish teacher who advocated peace. For example, Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, apparently also did.
3. Unfortunately, those who advocated violent resistance inspired the disastrous revolts that led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the expulsion of all Jews from Judea in 135 CE.
4. The high priesthood did not survive the first revolt, and the failure of the second revolt permanently discredited insurrection against Rome.
5. Classical Judaism arose and followed the peaceful counsel of Hillel.
6. Subsequent Judaism descends from this classical movement, and it is wrong to blame "Jews" (i.e., descendants of classical Judaism) for the death of Jesus.

The Resurrection of Jesus Was and Remains the Primary Foundation of Christianity

I. Without the resurrection the "Jesus Movement" would not have endured.

- A. As the New Testament itself suggests, the crucifixion dashed the hopes of Jesus's original followers (Luke 24:21). In my reconstruction Jesus's followers had expected that he would become an earthly king and they would share in his reign.
- B. There were other messianic figures in first century Palestine, and none of their movements long survived (Acts 5:34-37; e.g., Josephus, Antiquities XVII, 248).
- C. It seems clear that it was only the faith that Jesus had risen from the dead which caused his movement to last.

II. The resurrection of Jesus was also the basis for perhaps the two most important doctrines of Christianity.

A. The divinity of Christ.

1. Whatever Jesus may have claimed about himself, it was only at the resurrection that his followers concluded that he was divine. Even in John's Gospel which has the theme that Jesus is God incarnate and in which Jesus publicly declares his divinity (John 8:58, 10:30), no disciple confesses Christ's divinity until after the resurrection (John 20:28).
2. The resurrection experiences were similar to the experience of the divine. For example:
 - a. People experience God as someone who has no limits and can appear in any time or place and yet is intimately personal.
 - b. The risen Christ could appear in any time or place and yet was personal.
3. The risen Christ gave to his disciples the Spirit of God (John 20:22, Acts 2:33), and only God sends God (Donald Gelpi).
4. The divinity of Christ is the doctrine that most separates Christianity from its sister religions of Judaism and Islam. Note that Islam is happy to accept Jesus

- as a prophet, but denounces the claim that he is divine.
- B. Life after death.
1. In first century Judaism there was debate about whether there was life after death, since the Sadducees denied it, whereas the Pharisees affirmed it.
 2. But because of the resurrection of Jesus, the Church always proclaimed that the rest of us will also rise from the dead.
- C. The resurrection led to the observance of Sunday (“The Lord’s Day”), and this observance became central to Christian worship and identity.
1. The observance of the Sabbath was (and remains) central for Jewish law and life.
 2. Yet very quickly in Christianity Sunday replaced the Sabbath as the holy day (e.g., Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2).
 3. The only possible explanation is that the empty tomb was discovered and at least the initial resurrection appearance occurred on “the first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1-2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1).
- D. The resurrection also largely determined the structure of church leadership.
1. In the Jewish Scriptures most leadership both in politics and religion is dynastic, passed on within kinship groups.
 2. Jesus did not spell out a detailed leadership structure for his movement but did choose twelve men who were at least symbolically the heads of the twelve tribes of the New Israel.
 3. Neither of these leadership systems prevailed in the Early Church or subsequently.
 - a. It is true that the family of Jesus provided leadership in early Jewish Christianity for a time.
 - 1). James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the three pillars of the Early Church (Gal. 2:9), and Jesus’s other brothers were apparently well known missionaries (1 Cor. 9:5).
 - 2). And in Jewish Christianity relatives of Jesus continued to be leaders at least until the second century (Eusebius, Church History III:11,19-20).
 - 3). But Jewish Christianity was already in decline by the end of the first century and subsequently disappeared.
 - b. As a group the Twelve quickly lost importance.
 - 1). Shortly after the death of Jesus, the Church chose a replacement for Judas to complete the Twelve (Acts 1:16-26).
 - 2). But there does not seem to have been any movement to have a dynastic group of twelve leaders.
 - 3). Of the Twelve, only Peter and John seem to have had continuing importance as leaders.
 4. Instead, church leadership came primarily from those males who received a resurrection appearance and thereby gained the prestigious title of “apostle.”
 - a. Peter and John were among those to whom the risen Jesus appeared, and Peter’s dominant position derived from the fact that he was the first male to receive a resurrection appearance (Luke 24:34, 1 Cor. 15:5). The first appearance was probably to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb (Matthew 28:1-10, John 20:14-18), but as a woman she did not have equal access to leadership (see below for more detail).
 - b. Paul after having a resurrection appearance became an important

figure although he had not been a disciple of Jesus and had even persecuted the Church.

c. These and other leaders could claim the title of “apostle,” a Greek word which refers to someone who had been sent, that is commissioned, to do something important. The apostles were people to whom Jesus had appeared and given the commission to proclaim his risen lordship.

d. After the death of the apostles, there arose the doctrine of apostolic succession, the claim that the apostles had chosen the first bishops who in turn ordained others.

e. It is true that subsequently, there was some confusion about whether the “apostles” were all those who had seen the risen Lord or were only the Twelve, but here it is important to remember that the New Testament emphasizes that the risen Christ did appear to the Twelve (actually, the 11, since Judas had already left the faithful). See Matthew 28:16-20, 1 Cor. 15:5.

f. Apostolic succession continues in the “apostolic” churches today.

g. Of course, given the complexity of early church leadership (see above), apostolic succession did not establish itself immediately as the only model for church leadership, and it is not clear that there is an unbroken line of succession from the apostles.

E. The resurrection became central to the two great sacraments of the Church, Baptism and Eucharist.

1. The origins of baptism preceded the resurrection.

a. In the Jewish Scriptures water is used to remove ceremonial defilement.

b. John the Baptist invented and named “baptism” as a ceremony of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The ceremony consisted of confessing past sin and then immersing in water which sacramentally washed the sin away.

c. The historical Jesus received baptism from John.

2. Nevertheless, *Christian* baptism presupposed Jesus's resurrection.

a. Christian baptism ceremonially reenacted Jesus's death and resurrection. The person being baptized ceremonially participated in Jesus's death by going down into the water and participated in his resurrection by coming up (1 Rom. 6:3-4).

b. Baptism sacramentally bestowed the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, Acts 2:38), and in the New Testament the risen Christ gives the Spirit to the Church (John 20:22, Acts 2:33).

c. Baptism made someone a member of the Church which in turn existed under the Lordship of the risen Christ.

3. (review) The origins of the Eucharist also preceded the resurrection.

a. Sacred meals in the Judaism and, especially, the Passover Seder, provide some of the essential background for the Eucharist.

b. At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the Eucharist as a new covenant in his blood which was ratified by consuming bread and wine that were sacramentally his body and blood.

4. Nevertheless, after the resurrection the Eucharist now mediated the presence of the risen Lord (Luke 24:13-35) and looked forward to his triumphant return (1 Cor. 11:26).

- a. The Lord whose flesh and blood was consumed in the sacrament was the crucified and risen Christ.
- b. The Eucharist was a foretaste of the final banquet that Jesus would eat with his followers when he returned to judge and rule the Earth (Mark 14:25).

The Resurrection of Jesus Remains a Stumbling Block

- I. Skeptics regard the claim that Jesus rose bodily from the grave as ridiculous.
- II. The notion that at some future time the rest of us will like Jesus rise bodily from the tomb
 - A. Has always been a fantastic idea.
 - B. Has become even harder to believe after two thousand years of waiting.

Different Historical Explanations for the Claim that Jesus Rose from the Dead and the Larger Convictions Underlying Each

- I. The resurrection of Jesus raises crucial methodological problems for a historian, and we must start with a brief theoretical discussion.
- II. History is the reconstruction of the past which, of course, no longer exists.
- III. We reconstruct the past on the basis of several things:
 - A. Data (i.e., bits of information that have survived).
 - B. General convictions about what is real or most important. These vary from historian to historian and from culture to culture. Different historians and cultures assume that what (primarily?) shapes history is supernatural forces (e.g., the gods), changes in nature (e.g., in climate), great individuals, new ideas (e.g., monotheism or democracy), economics, or various other things.
 - C. Analogy. We assume that the past was in some way similar to the present and can be understood through present experience.
 - D. Correlation. We assume that a past event was a coherent whole, and we strive for a reconstruction that brings all the data into a meaningful pattern.
- IV. Reconstructing the resurrection of Jesus is problematic because the event poses severe difficulties in the bases listed above.
 - A. The data is sparse, mostly late, and often problematic.
 - 1. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is the earliest source but provides no details about the resurrection experience.
 - a. 1 Corinthians was written around 54 CE about a quarter of a century after the resurrection.
 - b. The letter preserves an even earlier tradition which lists the men to whom the risen Jesus appeared, some of whom Paul knew personally, and the list concludes with Paul himself (1 Cor. 15:3-11).
 - c. But the letter gives us no information about what these appearances were like and how the witnesses knew that they were seeing (?) Jesus.
 - 2. Mark's Gospel was written around 70 CE and records that female disciples discovered that the tomb in which Jesus's body had been placed was empty, but the gospel ends with only the *prediction* of a future resurrection appearance by Jesus (Mark 16:1-8). I believe that the reason for this curious ending is that Mark wanted the climax of his gospel to be the crucifixion. If Mark had gone on to narrate a resurrection appearance, this would inevitably have become the

climax. Note: The verses in Mark after 16:8 do not appear in the earliest and best ancient copies of the book and were added later and are indeed the climax of the edited gospel.

3. The gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were all written after 80 CE and narrate both the discovery of the empty tomb and various resurrection appearances but there are great discrepancies in detail. For example,

- a. The various accounts of the finding of the empty tomb differ regarding the number of women who went to the tomb, what time of day it was, and what they saw and heard when they arrived, and whether they reported their findings.
- b. The accounts of the appearances to the Eleven even differ on whether the first appearance was in Jerusalem or Galilee.
- c. Some of the resurrection appearances only occur in one source. Only 1 Corinthians mentions an appearance to five hundred (1 Cor. 15:6); only Luke mentions an appearance to two disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31); only John mentions an appearance while disciples were fishing (John 21:1-22).

B. All our sources come from Christians and have an obvious bias.

C. The general assumptions with which people today approach the resurrection material vary enormously depending both on one's faith and one's conviction about what is possible.

D. Christianity teaches that Jesus's resurrection has no analogy, and, historically, it cannot be established that a similar event ever occurred. I am not even aware of a serious claim that something comparable happened (i.e., that a historical human being died, was buried, and rose bodily from the tomb as Lord of the Universe). The nearest analogy that I know of is the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, and this Catholic doctrine was based on the idea that Mary's death and entrance into heaven should be similar to Jesus's.

E. Theoretically, it is not clear that an event which contains both natural and supernatural elements would necessarily be a coherent whole, and in practice it is hard to come up with a single scenario that explains all the data.

V. Given the above, the only undeniable historical fact is that at some point early Christians began to *proclaim* that Jesus had risen from the dead.

VI. To produce a more detailed reconstruction of the events, one can make different assumptions which produce different scenarios with different problems.

A. Fundamentalist Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible is the inerrant word of God, since God would want Christians to have an absolutely reliable source of information about important matters of faith.
2. What took place: The resurrection events occurred exactly as the canonical accounts record. The seeming discrepancies can be harmonized and are in part due to selective reporting.
3. Problems:
 - a). It is difficult to harmonize many divergent details in the canonical accounts, and heroic efforts to do so soon call into question the reliability of the narratives as a whole.
 - b). Is the inerrancy of the Bible the only way for Christians to receive certainty about important matters of faith? What about the guidance of

the Holy Spirit and communal experience? The Catholic Church proclaimed that the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven was infallible on the basis of the consensus of the faithful, not the clear testimony of scripture.

c). And do Christians need certainty, as opposed to sufficient probability? Are people absolutely certain of anything? Perhaps absolute certainty belongs to God alone.

d). A theological danger of Fundamentalism is that it can easily turn the Bible into an idol, i.e., an external substitute for God.

B. Conservative Christian

1. Assumption: The biblical accounts of the resurrection are basically historically reliable, and God can work physical miracles.

2. What took place: The resurrection happened basically as the New Testament accounts record and included the miraculous removal of Jesus's body from the tomb.

3. Problems:

a. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them when they are so desperately needed?

b. What happened to Jesus's body, and where is it now?

1). The traditional answer that Jesus's physical body ascended into heaven presupposes that heaven is full of bodies.

2). But the Church teaches that multitudes of dead people are presently in heaven even though their physical remains are obviously still on earth.

C. Liberal Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of legendary and purely literary material but does point to supernatural truth. God cannot work physical miracles and certainly did not raise a dead body. Nevertheless, God does have objective existence and does raise the "souls" of the dead.

2. What took place: God raised and glorified the "soul" of Jesus and gave the disciples objective visions attesting this act.

3. Problems:

a. The gospel texts clearly claim that the tomb was empty and that when Jesus appeared he still had a body of some sort.

b. If the "resurrection" of Jesus does not differ fundamentally from the resurrection of everyone else, what evidence is there for the divinity of Christ? How could monotheistic followers of Jesus have ever come to the conclusion that he was God?

c. Even today things that appear to be physical miracles (e.g., sudden healings under religious circumstances) still occasionally occur.

D. Radical Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of myth which needs to be demythologized. Christianity has to do only with this earthly life, since there is no personal survival after death.

2. What took place: After the crucifixion the followers of Jesus came to the realization that his cause was not lost (Willi Marxsen). Because of their mythological world view, they either experienced this realization as a vision of Jesus raised from the dead or else chose to talk about it in this symbolic way.

3. Problems:

- a. Is the common-sense notion that Jesus's followers can still work for his "cause" sufficient grounds for Christian hope? Every individual dies, and after two thousand years of Christians working to realize Jesus's vision, the world is still in a mess.
- b. The Church always taught that faith in life after death was central to Christianity.
- c. Due to recent medical advances, out-of-body, near-death experiences have become common and seem to confirm that there is life after death.

E. Sympathetic non-Christian

- 1. Assumption: Christianity is basically erroneous but contains useful perspectives and is worthy of respect.
- 2. What took place: Belief in the resurrection began as an honest mistake, perhaps due to
 - a. An error involving the location of the tomb. A tomb was indeed empty, but it was not Jesus's.
 - b. And/or a series of subjective visions, perhaps resulting from grief, guilt (for having abandoned Jesus), wishful thinking, and fear of a future without Jesus.
- 3. Problem: Could people have come to the wild conclusion that someone rose from the grave on the basis of an honest mistake? Has a similar mistake ever been made?

F. Hostile non-Christian

- 1. Assumption: Christianity is a dangerous fraud.
- 2. What took place: Jesus or his followers deliberately perpetrated a hoax.
- 3. Problems:
 - a. How could Jesus have perpetrated a hoax? How did he survive the crucifixion? It was the responsibility of an executioner to ensure that Jesus was dead, and an eyewitness account states that a Roman soldier did (John 19:31-35). And if Jesus somehow survived, he would have been in terrible medical condition. Could he have stayed alive while bound in the tomb? And even if he did, would the subsequent appearance of a desperately weak person have led anyone to conclude that he had risen from the dead?
 - b. If the disciples perpetrated a hoax, how could they have gotten anyone else to believe it?
 - 1). The claim that a former carpenter who had been executed as a criminal had risen from the dead and become lord of the universe sounded completely crazy.
 - 2). How could the disciples had gotten others to believe it if they did not believe it themselves?
 - 3). Christianity has in practice been far from perfect, but surely it is going too far to say that it is merely a dangerous fraud.

G. Hybrids: One can combine elements from the various positions noted above to produce a hybrid. Here are two contrasting examples:

- 1. The resurrection was a hoax, but Christianity is a good thing.
 - a. Jesus's disciples stole his body and successfully claimed that he had risen from the tomb (cf. Matt. 28:12-15).
 - b. But one must acknowledge that Christianity is a great religion that has accomplished wonderful things, including giving to the Gentile world the

- treasure of the Jewish Bible.
- 2. God actually did raise Jesus from the grave to attest Jesus's goals, but Christianity betrayed those goals by
 - a. Making Jesus a god.
 - b. Persecuting Jesus's own religion, Judaism.
- H. But producing a hybrid does not eliminate the problems, since each position that a hybrid combines still has them.
- I. Of course, one can hold that today it is impossible to know what led to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But it is only responsible to resort to this position after one has made a thorough examination of the issues and the evidence. An informed agnosticism about a crucial question may be responsible; an uninformed agnosticism is not.
- K. Discussion: What assumptions do you make, and what do you think happened on the first Easter? And how do you deal with the problems listed above for your position? Or do you have a position that is not listed and analyzed above, and if so, what is it, and what are its underlying assumptions?
- L. Warning: Most people base their fundamental perspectives not on evidence but on taste (Charles Peirce).

The Assumptions that I Bring to the Resurrection Texts

- I. Assumption 1: New Testament does contain errors but should be given the benefit of the doubt. Below we will carefully test the biblical witness to the resurrection and see that the basic claims seem to be historically accurate.
- II. Assumption 2: The divergences in the resurrection accounts are due to three factors:
 - A. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction). An illustration of faulty memory is the variation in the names and number of Mary Magdalene's companions in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10). I believe that John eliminates the companions to make the narrative simpler.
 - Two illustrations of apologetic reconstruction:
 - 1. Matthew's claim that the tomb of Jesus was guarded.
 - a. Matthew records that, when he wrote, the enemies of the Church were saying that the disciples of Jesus stole the body and proclaimed that he had risen from the dead (Matt. 27:62-66, 28:11-15).
 - b. Matthew (and probably his community) had to respond by explaining where this allegation came from and why it could not be true.
 - c. The response was
 - 1). Because the tomb was guarded, the disciples could not have stolen the body.
 - 2). After the guards reported that Jesus had risen from the dead, the fearful authorities bribed them to spread the fiction that the disciples stole his body.
 - d. Historically, it is most unlikely that the tomb was guarded.
 - 1. Mark, Luke, and John record nothing about a guard at the tomb, and it would have been in their interest to mention a guard to prove that Jesus had risen.
 - 2. After Jesus was dead, the Jewish and Roman authorities would have assumed that no further security measures were necessary. Surely, despite Matthew's claims to the contrary, no one thought of

posting a guard to prevent Jesus's disciples from fabricating a resurrection!

2. A second illustration of apologetic reconstruction is the tradition that Mary Magdalene on Easter morning saw an angel.

a. In both Matthew and John, Mary Magdalene first sees one or two angels and then sees the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:1-10, John 20:11-17).

b. While I hesitate to limit how God chooses to make revelations, it does seem strange that it was necessary to have an angel appear prior to having Jesus himself appear.

c. I would suggest that Mary Magdalene (and her companions?) saw Jesus, that this was the first appearance of the risen Christ, and that Mary Magdalene reported this startling event to other disciples. I suspect that Luke is correct that initially the male disciples did not believe her (Luke 24:10-11).

1). In the gospels the divine messenger tells Mary to proclaim the resurrection to the disciples, and this command implies that they do not yet know about the resurrection.

2). The tradition that Jesus rose on the first day of the week is associated primarily with Mary Magdalene and her companions.

3). Since there is no testimony of a resurrection appearance prior to Sunday morning, the appearance to Mary Magdalene and her companions must have been the first.

d. The testimony of women was not considered reliable in first century Judaism. Women could not testify in court.

e. Therefore, it was essential for the Church to downplay the fact that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. Note that the official list of witnesses as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 only has males.

f. At least part of the Church downplayed Mary Magdalene's testimony by saying

1). She did not see Jesus himself but merely an angel or two.

2). She could not have been the origin of the tradition that Jesus rose from the dead, since even though an angel told her that Jesus was alive, she was too disoriented to share the message (Mark 16:7-8).

g. If the above analysis is accurate, I would nominate Mary Magdalene to be the patroness of that never ending chain of women whose contributions to the Church were not fully acknowledged.

B. Theological and literary editing also has contributed to the discrepancies between resurrection texts or even the invention of some appearances. Two illustrations:

1. John's claim that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb "while it was still dark" (John 20:1) is literary not historical.

a. Historically, it is unlikely that Mary Magdalene would have gone to a tomb when it was dark, and the other gospels record that she came when there was light.

b. Apologetically, Mary seeing the empty tomb when there was darkness casts doubt on the reliability of her testimony.

c. Throughout John's Gospel darkness and night are literary symbols of spiritual ignorance and alienation from God. Note, e.g., 1:4-5, 8:12, 9:39,

13:30.

d. In John's Gospel when Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, she assumes that the body has been stolen (John 20:1-3).

e. Hence, she is in spiritual darkness, and John uses the physical darkness of the scene to symbolize her state.

2. The story of the trip to Emmaus may be only a Eucharistic meditation on the resurrection (Luke 24:13-35).

a. This particular story only occurs in Luke, and it cannot be any of the appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8.

b. In the story two disciples are walking to the village of Emmaus and talking about the crucifixion and the women's report of the empty tomb and angels saying that Jesus was alive, a report which the two disciples doubt. A stranger joins them and rebukes them for their lack of faith and points out scriptural prophecies that the messiah must die and then rise from the dead. When the two disciples arrive at their destination and the stranger joins them for a meal, the stranger breaks the bread. Then the disciples realize that it is Jesus and he vanishes.

c. The story is thoroughly Eucharistic.

1). The climax of the story is Christ being "known in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35).

2). And earlier in the story we almost have a "ministry of the word" with Christ interpreting the scriptures.

d. Therefore, it is quite plausible that the story arose as a Eucharistic meditation on the historical fact that at least one of the resurrection appearances occurred when the disciples were eating together (Acts 10:41) and that subsequently disciples experienced the presence of Jesus during Eucharistic celebrations. I suspect that Luke himself wrote the story.

C. Different "translations" into earthly terms of experiences that were essentially unlike normal experience also led to discrepancies in the resurrection accounts.

1. The appearances led to the claim that the human being Jesus had risen from the grave and become Lord of the Universe.

2. No analogous claim seems to exist.

3. Therefore, it seems logical that the appearances were also utterly different from any other experience.

4. Things which are unique cannot be described literally, since language is based on common experience.

5. However, experiences can be partially translated into terms which people who have not had the experience can understand, and very different translations are possible. One could say to a blind person that shocking pink is like the taste of a hot pepper or like the blast of an electric guitar.

6. I believe that the details of the resurrection appearances (e.g., what Jesus said) are at least often translations of the convictions that originated in the appearances.

III. Assumption 3: Thanks to critical scholarship we can to some extent separate early and late traditions in the New Testament. At the very least, traditions which appear in a document are as old as the document itself.

IV. Assumption 4: God does work miracles, but miracles are only ambiguous signs which are intended to invite faith, not replace it. Here by "faith" I mean the knowledge and trust that

arise primarily from an individual or communal relationship with God. Note that in the gospels Jesus sometimes

A. Declares that his miracles are signs of the truth of his larger message (e.g., Matt. 11:2-6).

B. Refuses to work a miracle if there is no faith already (e.g., Mark 8:11-12, John 4:46-50).

V. Assumption 5: God often gives miraculous signs (whether small or great) to help beginning Christians have an initial faith and then invites Christians to grow into a mature faith that does not depend on miracles. Instead, a mature faith based on a relationship with God can become strong evidence that God can work miracles when appropriate. I believe that the organization of John's Gospel underlines the transition from a faith based primarily on miracles to a faith based primarily on the presence of Jesus known through love.

A. In the earlier part of John, miraculous signs lead people to faith who are open to it (e.g., John 2:1-11). Note that in John's Gospel no sign, regardless of how great, will lead people to faith who are closed to it (e.g., John 9).

B. In the later chapters of John, Jesus insists that if the disciples love one another, Jesus will dwell in them and they will know him as divine (14:18-23).

VI. Assumption 6: The energy that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit is imparted by the Spirit herself and is not (exclusively) a subjective enthusiasm in believers. I base this assumption on my own prayer experience.

VII. Assumption 7: Accordingly, at most, historical research can make belief in the resurrection more plausible. A secure faith must have additional support from elsewhere.

VIII. Discussion: How do you feel about my assumptions?

The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus, One Evaluation

I. One historical reconstruction of what "objectively" took place. (By "objective" I mean what people at the scene could have observed regardless of their religious beliefs.)

A. Mary Magdalene and probably one or more other women discovered that the tomb in which Jesus had been placed was empty.

1. It has often been claimed that the story of the finding of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend which was probably late. This claim has some basis and is at least *possible*.

a. 1 Corinthians 15, which is our earliest written presentation of the resurrection and is a quarter of a century later, does not mention the empty tomb.

b. A late story about people finding the empty tomb could easily have arisen, especially if the grave's location was forgotten. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter demonstrates the apologetic creativity of the Early Church. Moreover, since the Romans did not usually return the bodies of executed criminals and Mary Magdalene was a visitor to Jerusalem, it is conceivable that the burial site was lost.

2. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the preponderance of the historical evidence makes it *likely* that the tomb was empty, regardless of how one may explain this unsettling fact.

a. Little can be deduced from the silence of 1 Corinthians 15, particularly since "was buried" and "was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4) may actually imply knowledge of the empty tomb and does imply faith in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

- b. There are signs that the story of the tomb's discovery was early and widespread. The gospels of Mark and John have independent versions, and in both there is evidence of editing, and apparently the evangelists reworked older material (Reginald Fuller).
- 1). A possible sign of editing in Mark's account is the addition of Peter in the command, "say to his disciples and to Peter" (Mark 16:7). The addition was stylistically awkward, since Peter was a disciple. But because Mark chose to retain the story of Peter denying knowing Jesus (Mark 14:66-72) and chose to end the gospel before the resurrection appearances, it was necessary to add at least an allusion to Jesus's later restoration of Peter.
 - 2). One example of John's extensive editing is that Mary Magdalene only recognizes Jesus when he says her name (John 20:16). Earlier in the gospel Jesus proclaims that he is the good shepherd who calls his sheep by name and they recognize his voice (John 10:3-4).
- c. It is not likely that the location of the tomb was forgotten, because the gospel accounts of the burial and discovery are basically credible.
- 1). (review) The burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea appears to be historical. If the Church had not known who buried Jesus, it would not have claimed that it was someone who
 - a). Came from an obscure town.
 - b). Actually belonged to the circles who demanded Jesus's execution. The gospels freely admit that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem Council; Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50-51) which condemned Jesus and petitioned Pilate for his execution (Mark :14:53-64, 15:1; Luke 22:66-23:22).
 - 2). Joseph could scarcely have forgotten where he buried Jesus and certainly would have been able to verify that the body of Jesus was still there (if such had been the case).
 - 3). It is historically likely that Mary Magdalene (and her companions?) knew the location of the tomb. It was the solemn obligation of family and friends to give the deceased an honorable burial. Therefore, it is historically likely that the women would have witnessed the crucifixion and seen where the body was put, as the gospels record (e.g., Mark 15:40, 47).
- d. (review) It is most improbable that a late apologetic legend would have attributed the finding of the empty tomb to women, since in first century Judaism the testimony of women was considered unreliable. Women could not testify in court.
- e. Of course, we could be dealing with an early apologetic legend about an empty tomb which originated at a time when it was still known that only the women remained in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this hypothesis faces severe difficulties.
- 1). Such a legend would have begun and circulated when Mary Magdalene and her companions were alive and knew it was false.
 - 2). There is no evidence that the males fled from *Jerusalem*. Both Luke and John specifically state that the males were still in the city

on Easter (e.g., Luke 24:33). Matthew and Mark implicitly assume the same, since the women must tell the men that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him (Matt. 28:7, Mark 16:7).

3. A natural explanation for the tomb becoming empty is conceivable but not plausible.

- a. It is conceivable that someone removed the body (e.g., the disciples stole the body and said that Jesus had risen from the dead [Matt. 28:12-15]).
- b. But such explanations seem most unlikely.
 - 1). The male disciples appear to have fled and gone into hiding (Mark 14:50, cf. John 20:19); would they then have stolen the body?
 - 2). What possible reason would anyone else have had to remove the body?
 - 3). The removal would have taken place on the Sabbath when such strenuous activity was forbidden and highly visible or (after the Sabbath ended at sunset) in the dark.

B. Certain disciples “saw” something which convinced them Jesus was alive, and there are problems with dismissing these experiences as subjective visions.

1. Given what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:4-8, it seems to me virtually certain that many early disciples saw something which they perceived to be Jesus risen from the dead.
2. It is *possible* that all they saw were subjective visions resulting from trauma and wishful thinking.
3. Nevertheless, there are difficulties with the assumption that we are dealing with subjective visions.
 - a. In Jewish tradition there was no precedent to enable people to imagine the bodily resurrection of an individual before the final judgment at the end of the present world.
 - b. The normal way to console oneself over the death of a martyr was to look for God to punish those responsible and perhaps to reward the martyr on the Last Day.
 - c. An empty tomb does not normally lead to visions of a resurrection. Note Mary Magdalene’s response to the empty tomb in John 20:1-2.
 - d. The accounts of the resurrection appearances stress that those who witnessed them were initially incredulous (Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:37, 41), sometimes so much so that at first they did not even recognize Jesus (e.g., John 20:14).
 - e. Jesus had taught his disciples the danger of hypocrisy and the need for discernment, and we may question whether his followers would have easily been deceived by a subjective experience.
 - f. None of the accounts of the resurrection appearances tells us that the followers of Jesus were having an “inner” experience. Instead, our sources claim that in a number of resurrection encounters more than one person was present and Jesus was somehow visible to everyone. Moreover, it is noteworthy that elsewhere Matthew is enthusiastic about dreams and elsewhere Luke is enthusiastic about visions, but neither evangelist suggests that the resurrection experiences were dreams or

visions.

C. After the resurrection there was a continuing experience of the presence of Jesus's Spirit.

1. After the resurrection appearances ended, the people who had them continued to experience the presence of Jesus, but in a less dramatic and tangible way.
2. Disciples who did not receive an appearance could also experience this spiritual presence.
3. The experience of Jesus being present reinforced faith in his resurrection, since if Jesus was present, he could not still be dead.
4. Consequently, New Testament texts connect the resurrection appearances with the gift of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appears, he either gives the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23) or promises that he will do so soon (Luke 24:49).
5. Depending on one's understanding of what the experience of the Holy Spirit is, the presence of the Spirit can support any of the various Christian positions on the resurrection enumerated above.

D. By contrast, it is likely that the resurrection accounts that stress the undeniable physical presence of Jesus, the risen Jesus eating a piece of fish (Luke 24:41-43), Jesus challenging Thomas to put a finger into the nail wounds (John 20:24-29) are not historical in the strict sense.

1. Such stories appear only in individual late works.
2. If such events had actually occurred, their absence in the earlier tradition would be hard to explain.
3. It is easier to explain their origin through apologetic and theological concerns. The Church had to reply to Jewish allegations that the disciples stole the corpse (Matt. 27:62-66, 28:11-15) and perhaps radical Christian allegations that Christ did not have a physical body (e.g., 2 John 7).
4. The tradition of apologetic and theological elaboration continued after the New Testament was written, as we can see from the apocryphal Gospel of Peter.
5. Stories in which the risen Jesus has an undeniable physical presence may be valid presentations of the significance of the resurrection or even valid translations into earthly terms of experiences which differed fundamentally from normal reality. Jesus really did rise from the dead. The presence of the risen Christ was so tangible that it was as if he could have eaten something or someone could have felt his wounds.
6. However, these stories probably are not *literally* accurate.

II. Given my methodological assumptions (see above), I conclude that the most *probable* explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples.

III. An attempt to reply to the problems of my position.

A. As we saw, there are two major objections to the "conservative" Christian position which I hold as the most likely:

1. Concern about what happened to Jesus's body.
2. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them, since often they are so desperately needed?

B. In reply, I would venture

1. By definition, a miracle is something that cannot be fully explained by natural causation and must be due to some special act of God.
2. Therefore, to ask for a complete natural explanation of what happened to

Jesus's body is implicitly to return to the assumption that God cannot work miracles, an assumption that I do not make.

3. In response to the question of what God *might* have done with the body, I would speculate that God transformed the corpse of Jesus into a "spiritual" body (i.e., a body consisting of energy rather than matter). This spiritual body appeared to the disciples and entered into heaven.

a. Even in nature caterpillars become butterflies, and mass can turn into energy and radiate to somewhere else!

b. A body consisting of energy would explain the otherwise puzzling fact that in the accounts of several resurrection appearances the disciples do not initially recognize Jesus but subsequently do so.

c. Paul stresses in 1 Corinthians 15 that at the general resurrection our present bodies will be transformed into spiritual bodies because we will bear the image of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:42-49).

d. Paul testifies that the risen Christ appeared to him, and Paul knew other people who received a resurrection appearance.

e. Very likely Paul based his belief that our bodies will ultimately be transformed into spiritual bodies on his own experience that at least in his encounter with the risen Christ, Jesus had a "spiritual body."

f. Of course, we do not know precisely what Paul meant by a "spiritual body," but certainly a body made of energy would fit the description.

4. The objection that God cannot work miracles because otherwise he would work more of them to help people in desperate need is not relevant to Jesus's resurrection.

a. God did not save Jesus from suffering and death, but saved Jesus after he faithfully accepted God's call to suffer and die.

b. Consequently, the resurrection challenges us in earthly tragedies to focus on final salvation rather than expect God to fix the situation here and now with a miracle.

IV. Discussion: How do you feel about my position that the most probable explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

The Theological and Spiritual Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus

I. (review) In my opinion, the historical evidence concerning Jesus's resurrection invites belief but does not compel it.

II. Christians are left with the question of whether we can confidently believe in the resurrection, and if so, how?

III. The New Testament suggests there are at least four bases for belief in Jesus's resurrection:

A. The testimony concerning the empty tomb.

B. The "appearances" to the first disciples. Note that the New Testament stresses that these were privileged encounters (e.g., Acts 10:41) which have ceased (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

C. The continuing presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

D. The final hope that the resurrection inspires, namely that those who are faithful to Jesus will also rise from the dead and share in his glory (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:12-14).

IV. There are objections that can be raised against each of these.

A. The empty tomb

1. (review) Historically, the story could conceivably be an apologetic legend.
Note: I do not think that theories which hypothesize either a mistake or a plot to explain the empty tomb are historically plausible.

2. Theologically, there are two problems:

a. The empty tomb could be seen to imply that Christ's resurrection was merely a resuscitation in which Jesus returned to earthly life and presumably died again later.

b. The empty tomb has traditionally been seen to imply our fleshly resurrection at the end of time, and this implication is troubling.

1). The main Christian tradition has also taught the resurrection of the self ("soul") at the moment of death, and contemporary out-of-body experiences seem to confirm this (see below for further discussion).

2). The resurrection of the flesh raises various problems. Can cannibals be raised? Can we achieve final fulfillment in limited bodies? It must, however, be added that Paul taught that after the fleshly resurrection of our present bodies, our bodies would be changed into a more glorious form (1 Cor. 15:35-54).

B. (Review) The first disciples could conceivably have been deceived by subjective experiences, since the disciples were burdened with grief and guilt (for having abandoned Jesus) and uncertainty about their future without Jesus.

C. The Spirit Christians experience today might be something other than the presence of the risen Christ. Any gathering has a "spirit," and this spirit often reflects the values and beliefs of the group in question.

D. The hope that the resurrection inspires could merely be unfounded optimism ("pie in the sky when you die").

V. In my opinion, the weakest proof of the resurrection is the empty tomb, and Christian faith must not principally rest on it.

VI. Nevertheless, we can strengthen the testimony of the empty tomb if we take the biblical position that the tomb is a special, miraculous *sign* of a transcendent event, Jesus leaving the created world and returning to the Father.

A. Such a position does not necessarily commit us to a resuscitation of Jesus or a fleshly resurrection of Christians.

B. It is apparently the theology of the evangelists and Paul, since in the gospels people do not come to faith primarily on the basis of the tomb, and in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul does not even appeal to the empty tomb when challenging his readers to believe.

1. It is true that John 20:8 tells us that when the Beloved Disciple saw the empty tomb he believed.

2. But earlier by welcoming Mary into his own home (John 19:26-27), the Beloved Disciple showed his great love for Jesus and began to love others in the same way that Jesus did.

3. And John's Gospel insists that if we love we will know the truth (e.g., John 14:21). Note that even when Peter sees the empty tomb, he does not yet believe.

C. Jesus taught that his miracles were signs of the larger reality of God's lordship (e.g., Luke 11:20).

D. John's Gospel explicitly calls the resurrection a "sign" (20:30), and in John signs are miraculous events which point beyond themselves to larger truths.

VII. To determine whether we are merely dealing with subjective visions, we have to assess the spiritual content of what the disciples saw. Note that the Christian tradition has insisted

that there are ways of unmasking “false” visions, and even common sense suggests that some visions must be only subjective.

VIII. To a remarkable degree the New Testament accounts of the resurrection appearances have a common structure (Charles Perry). The structure:

- A. A presence which initially could be doubted or misinterpreted but which in time produced a lasting conviction that Jesus was actually there.
- B. A command to share the message.
- C. Some kind of promise--a promise that would be fulfilled when the message was shared.
- D. Here are three illustrations of the complete pattern:
 - 1. The appearance to the disciples in Luke 24:36-49.
 - a. Jesus appears, but the disciples think that they are seeing a ghost.
 - b. Jesus proves his identity beyond all question by showing them his hands and feet and eating a piece of fish.
 - c. Jesus tells the disciples that they must proclaim what they have witnessed to all nations.
 - d. But he promises that before they do they will be clothed with power from on high.
 - 2. The appearance to the Eleven in Matthew 28:16-20.
 - a. The Eleven see the risen Jesus, but at least some doubt.
 - b. Jesus comes to them apparently ending their doubt.
 - c. Jesus commands them to make disciples of all nations.
 - d. He promises to be with the disciples as they do so.
 - 3. The appearance to Paul as recounted in Acts 26:12-18.
 - a. Paul sees a brilliant light and hears a voice which he apparently does not recognize and asks for identification.
 - b. The voice identifies itself as Jesus.
 - c. Jesus commands Paul to testify to the Gentiles.
 - d. And promises to rescue Paul from both Jews and Gentiles.

IX. It seems to me that this common structure in the accounts must basically have been in the actual experiences.

X. It is up to us on the basis of our own growing spiritual insight to determine whether such an experience could arise from a subjective vision. Typically in subjective visions the experience initially seems real to us, but later we begin to question it.

XI. The literary structure of the resurrection accounts suggests that one way to determine whether the experiences were genuine is to act on them ourselves and see if Jesus fulfills his promise to be faithful to those who believe and obey.

XII. I believe that the structure is also an indication that the experience of seeing the risen Jesus was similar to experiencing the Divine. When God comes to us, we may initially feel that “something is going on” but not immediately discern that God is present. But then we realize that it is God. We sense that God is inviting us to do something and promising that if we obey he will support us.

XIII. To determine whether the Spirit in the midst of Christian communities today is (at least sometimes?) the Spirit of the risen Christ, we must do three things (Peter Carnley):

- A. Determine what the “Spirit of Jesus” is by studying the historical human being.
(review) For example, in these lectures we saw that Jesus was compassionate toward people in need, demanding of his disciples but bore with their failures, impatient with hypocrisy in religious leaders, obedient to God.
- B. Learn to perceive what the Spirit in contemporary Christian communities is,

including whether something more is present than just shared belief and commitment.

C. Ask whether the spirit that is "objectively" present is the Spirit of Jesus.

D. I would add: Be ready to receive the Spirit ourselves. I think that most people who sincerely believe in the resurrection do so because Christ's Spirit has come to them. By the "Spirit" the Bible means

1. A divine energy. The biblical words for "spirit" literally mean wind.

2. Something that changes our way of thinking and perceiving so that we see the world more like the way that God does. Paul describes the Spirit as the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:12-16).

XIV. To determine whether the final hope that the resurrection inspires is more than misplaced optimism, we must note precisely what the hope is and whether it corresponds to our fundamental needs as human beings.

A. In my opinion, a hope which corresponds to a basic, universal human need is realizable, since otherwise the universal need is inexplicable.

B. The hope that the resurrection inspires is our entry into the fullness of God's love and glory by means of accepting Christ's message. Of course, part of that fullness is eternal life.

C. Accordingly, we must ask at least the following:

1. Do we as human beings need ultimately to share in the fullness of God's love and glory, or can we be completely satisfied with less? Would we be fully satisfied with a God who forever withheld something from us that he could give us?

2. Do we need to get to this consummation by imitating Christ's example of self-sacrificing love, or would we be satisfied with some other route, such as winning it in a lottery?

3. Do we instinctively feel that we can only come to share fully in God's life if he shared fully in ours? Would we be comfortable with a God who demands that we experience debilitating suffering and death when God himself never did? Does the faith that God had a human life and is, therefore, our brother/sister, as well as our Lord and Creator, invite us into a richer relationship with God?

4. Can we affirm on the basis of our own experience the Church's witness and continuing experience that through Christ Christians in earthly life already have the "down payment" (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of the final consummation? Have we felt the power of God lifting us up, and does the power that we have experienced point backward to the power that raised Jesus and forward to the power which will give us life after death? Note that St. Paul believed that Christian life is a series of deaths and resurrections.

a. In his own life Paul repeatedly felt that he was all but dead and that the power of God raised him from the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-11, 11:23-30).

b. Paul insisted that in baptism Christians share in the death of Jesus and enter a new life sustained by the Spirit (Rom. 6:3-11).

XV. Because of my answers to the questions listed above, I feel that Jesus did rise from the dead.

A. The empty tomb and the resurrection appearances led to Christian faith, and that faith makes so much sense of life as a whole.

B. Therefore, it is reasonable that God would have provided the resurrection as a special sign.

XVI. Discussion: But how do you answer these questions, and do you feel that Jesus rose from the dead?

Can We Affirm Our Own Future Resurrection From the Dead, and Is This Affirmation Consistent with the Resurrection of Jesus?

I. In the earlier books of the Jewish Scriptures there is no belief in meaningful life after death for individuals.

A. The assumption was that the mind and the body were inseparable.

B. Therefore, after death, as the body obviously decayed, the mind decayed also, and consciousness faded.

C. What immortality that there was for individuals was the hope that a person would have an everlasting name.

1. One's continuing family would honor the person's memory and complete the unfinished goals of the deceased. Note that the Jewish Scriptures have striking regulations to guarantee that families would not die out.

a. Levirate marriage in which a man must marry his brother's childless widow and produce a son who would legally continue the brother's line (Deut. 25:5-6).

b. The Jubilee Year in which all a family's traditional land would be restored if it had been lost (Leviticus 25).

2. The Jewish people as a whole would always remember the virtues of the saints.

3. Of course, sometimes families did die out, and at various points even the survival of the Jewish people seemed uncertain.

4. There were several theological results of this situation.

a. A cynicism about whether God truly rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked (see Job and Ecclesiastes).

b. A dubious theological claim either that God fully rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this present life or rewards or punishes one's descendants on the basis of their ancestors' behavior.

c. A questionable assumption that Israel and/or the Jewish people would last forever.

II. Later in response to new historical and philosophical developments there arose two competing understandings of meaningful life after death in ancient Judaism.

A. The mainline one was resurrection of the body at the Day of Judgment and arose to justify martyrdom, especially during the persecution by king Antiochus Epiphanes, a persecution that threatened the survival of Judaism as a whole. Bodily resurrection appears in the books of Daniel (12:2, 13) and 2 Maccabees (chapter 7) which deal with that persecution.

1. At the Day of Judgment, God would raise the bodies of the dead from their graves and pass sentence on everyone.

2. The righteous would reign on a renewed earth, and the wicked would suffer.

3. I suspect that the torture and mutilation of the bodies of martyrs during the persecution helped inspire the hope that those bodies would be fully restored (2 Macc. 7:11).

B. An alternative picture of meaningful life after death was that sometime after an individual's death the spirit would leave the body and go to God for judgment, with the righteous going to heaven and the wicked to hell. Most scholars think that this view appears in the Wisdom of Solomon (Wisdom 3:3-9, 4:7-5:16), and it certainly appears in various non-canonical ancient Jewish writings (e.g., Jubilees, xxiii 31).

III. A compromise position which may have existed already in the time of Jesus (N.T. Wright)

and which the Church certainly adopted later was a two stage life after death.

A. At an individual's death the soul went to judgment and temporarily ended up in heaven or hell.

B. On the Day of Judgment, God would raise the bodies of the dead, reunite the bodies with their souls, and transform the earth into paradise where the righteous would now live.

C. Perhaps Jesus himself believed in this compromise position.

1. Luke 16:19-31 clearly pictures the spirit of a wicked man suffering in hell and another person enjoying being in "Abraham's bosom," while life on earth continues.

2. But Jesus may not have intended this *parable* to present a theology of how God rewards or punishes people after death, but only that God does.

3. (review) Jesus certainly did believe in a final resurrection of the dead, followed by a final judgment (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24, Mark 12:18-27).

4. (review) But the historical Jesus did not believe that after his individual death he would rise bodily from the grave three days later, ascend into heaven, reign there in glory briefly, and then return to judge and rule the earth. That belief began in the Early Church after Jesus's resurrection.

D. At least soon after the death of Jesus the compromise position which combined both the resurrection of the soul at death and the resurrection (and transformation) of the body on the Day of Judgment became standard in Christianity.

1. The compromise appears already in Paul's letters.

a. Paul emphatically stresses that Christ will return in triumph to earth and raise the dead from their graves (1 Cor. 15:51-55, 1 Thes. 4:13-18).

b. But Paul as he faces the possibility of his execution can claim that he would rather die now and be with Christ (Phil. 1:21-23).

2. John's Gospel can insist both

a. At a future hour those in the graves will rise at Christ's call, and the good will have blessings and the evil, condemnation (John 5:28-29).

b. Those who believe in Jesus "will never die" (John 11:26).

IV. There were obvious problems with these various beliefs, even if the problems were not always admitted.

A. Since human bodies decomposed and in some cases even got recycled into other bodies, the resurrection of the body was hard to imagine and sometimes bordered on being logically impossible.

B. The departure of the soul from the body at death presupposed that

1. Human beings during earthly life were composed of a corruptible body and an immortal soul.

2. But it was never clear how these two very different things could work together.

3. There was little evidence that an immortal soul even existed, especially since a sick body impacted spiritual functions.

4. The dualism of body and soul denigrated the body and the material world and sex. Note that sex is the physical act that most influences our "spirits."

C. The combination of the soul going to judgment and temporarily being in heaven or hell and then being reunited with an earthly body was complicated and implied that the dead in heaven lacked final fulfillment.

V. Because of these problems, some modern Christians, usually without publicly admitting what they were doing, began to qualify life after death and limit what humans could hope for.

Some sophisticated Christians stressed that God would fully remember the deceased and, therefore, the deceased would continue to live in the memory of God. Or there was the claim that eternal life was timeless and need not imply everlasting existence.

VI. In modern times several things have occurred that raise further questions of whether resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment is credible.

A. The Day of Judgment which the Early Church felt was near has delayed for two thousand years.

B. Scientists have discovered that the universe is nearly fourteen billion years old with an unimaginable number of planets, some of which could contain intelligent life.

C. Life on earth has evolved for eons.

D. Therefore, to believe in a final resurrection of the body, one must believe that God will intervene on one planet and

1. End billions of years of geological and biological evolution

2. Somehow restore life to bodies which have decayed and been recycled, even recycled into other human beings!

E. In response to such problems some Christian denominations have increasingly stressed the resurrection of the soul and final judgment at the moment of death and downplayed waiting for Christ's triumphant return to earth to raise the dead from their graves.

F. Marginal Christian groups have kept predicting the imminent return of Christ, and these predictions have always been at least premature and have weakened Christian faith in people who believed them and made Christianity look ridiculous to outsiders.

G. I think that it is now time for the Church to admit that bodily resurrection on some future day is no longer plausible (if it ever was).

VII. By contrast, several things have happened which make the resurrection of the self at the moment of death and some sort of judgment highly likely even without any religious evidence.

A. We now know that the self is a complex electronic pattern produced by the firing of nerve endings and that in this present life the body sustains the pattern.

B. Thanks to computer technology, we know that a complex electronic pattern containing human thoughts and emotions can be sent wirelessly into another place. One example of the process is called e-mail.

C. Thanks to advances in medicine, it is now often possible to revive people who were clinically dead, and we have numerous reports of near-death, out-of-body experiences. People report

1. When they were "clinically dead," they left their body.

2. And soon went through a "tunnel."

3. On the other side they met their departed friends and relatives.

4. The deceased were then interviewed by a "Being of Light" who showed them all that they ever did and how their good deeds benefited others and their evil deeds harmed. The deceased were proud of their good deeds and ashamed of their evil ones.

5. Then thanks to the advances of modern medicine, the deceased were able to return to their bodies and earthly life.

6. The deceased are almost always certain that their out-of-body experiences were accurate and not hallucinations.

7. And at least in some cases people learned things when clinically dead that subsequently have turned out to be verifiable.

D. On the basis of such information it seems very likely that at death the body, so to speak, punches the send button, the "spirit" (i.e., the electronic pattern) leaves the body

and goes to another realm and faces judgment by God.

E. Of course, religious experience confirms this conclusion and is what the Church always taught. We experience that God gives to us new energy (during prayer, for example), and the Church has always taught that God who empowers us here raises us to new life when we die and then we face judgment.

F. The near-death, out-of-body experiences do, however, raise a problem for Christian faith because the experiences of Christians and non-Christians do not significantly differ, thus raising the question of whether Christianity is superior to other spiritual paths. In my view

1. Near-death, out-of-body experiences disprove conservative Christian claims that only those who believe in Jesus and are baptized can be saved.
2. However, I still feel that believing that God became human in Jesus and suffered humiliation and death makes people love God more fully at least in earthly life and even allows God to relate to humans more fully.

VIII. If one likes, one can argue that this new understanding of life after death at least partially vindicates the older compromise of the departure of the soul at death and a subsequent bodily resurrection, since an electronic pattern has similarities to both a body (an energy field is something physical) and a soul (an energy field is not matter).

IX. This new understanding of life after death is compatible with the bodily resurrection of Jesus if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a special sign of his divinity and that there is life after death, rather than an exact model for our future resurrection. The theology that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special “sign” already appears in John’s Gospel (John 20:30).

Student Presentations on Their Personal Understanding of Jesus's Resurrection and its Implications.