

# The Message of Jesus

John Dominic Crossan and Ben Witherington III

## OPENING STATEMENT

By John Dominic Crossan

### *PROLOGUE: HISTORY AND TRAGEDY*

The Bardo Museum in Tunis contains the world's greatest collection of Roman mosaics, and the greatest of the greatest is one that was excavated at Sousse on the Gulf of Hammamet about ninety miles south of the capital. It dates—probably—to the early third century and depicts Virgil with a scroll on his lap as he starts to write his *Aeneid*, that gospel of Roman imperial theology published in 19 bce after his own death and by order of Augustus.

Virgil's left hand holds a scroll on his lap, and his right holds the stylus aloft as he stares meditatively into the distance. He is starting his epic poem and has just written these words: "*Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso quidve . . .*" We know them as book 1, lines 8-9a: "O Muse, recall the causes for me why—wounded by sacrilege or [angered by sorrow]," Hera, Queen of the Gods, made Aeneas' life so difficult as he journeyed from the doomed city of Troy to found the Roman race and Julian dynasty in Italy.

You immediately hear—as you are meant to hear—the echo from the opening line of the *Odyssey*, where Homer starts with, "Tell me about the man, O Muse." Tell me about Odysseus, that earlier and archetypal sea-wanderer trying amid great travail to reach his home. But that parallelism only increases your surprise when you see not just one but two of the nine Muses standing one on either side of Virgil. They are the goddess-spirits of artistic creativity, but while only one is invoked, two are present. Just for symmetry? Not really.

To Virgil's right stands Clio, the Muse of History, identified by her scroll of record. On his left, then, you expect to see Calliope, Muse of Epic Poetry,

identified by her writing tablet. But what you see is Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, identified by the tragic mask worn in Greek drama. History and Tragedy stand on either side as Virgil composes his Roman imperial manifesto and Roman theological masterpiece.

Finally, it is all clear. Of course. You are in Carthage, that great city destroyed by Rome, not just as a military defeat but as a ruthless vengeance for Hannibal's incursions into Italy. From the off-again, on-again hundred years' war for control of the Mediterranean between the mid-third and mid-second centuries bce, that mosaic sends out this message: *What the victors record as history, the vanquished know as tragedy.*

So, therefore, before you ever hear or even imagine the "message of Jesus," on which side of Virgil do you find yourself standing? And do you think it might make a difference to your interpretation?

#### EMPIRE AND ESCHATON

The God of the biblical tradition opposes empire. That is repeatedly clear—from the Egyptians in Exodus, through the Assyrians in Nahum, the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks in Daniel, on into the Romans in Revelation. What is not so clear is why exactly. What is wrong with those empires, that is, with imperialism itself as the normalcy of human civilization across the last six thousand years?

Is it that they are all pagan, rather than Jewish (in the Old Testament) or pagan rather than Christian (in the New Testament)? Is it that they are distributively unjust, and the biblical God is a God of distributive justice? Or, more deeply, is it that distributive injustice is maintained only by the act or at least threat of violence? Does the biblical God stand against injustice and/or against violence? Put another way, is the biblical God violent or nonviolent? For Christians, that question means, is the God revealed in Jesus violent or nonviolent? Again, is the "message" incarnated and embodied in Jesus one of violence or nonviolence against violence itself?

Terms like *background* and *foreground*, or even *text* and *context*, often obscure the necessarily interactive mode of those words. Imagine thinking that American racism was simply background that could be avoided or context that could be omitted from the "message" of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But since we have often or even usually done that with the "message" of Jesus, I prefer the solitary term *matrix* to designate the interactive context of Jesus. That matrix sees Jesus as a homeland Jew turning Jewish eschaton against Roman *imperium*.

It is not, in other words, a clash between Christianity and Judaism, but between Christian (that is, Messianic) Judaism and Roman imperialism.

The best place to see that matrix in operation is Daniel 7 from the 160s bce. In that chapter, imperialism is summed up by the Babylonians, Medeans, Persians, and Macedonian Greeks. The first three of them are not truly human but are rather beasts “up out of the sea,” feral thrusts from the chaos of the land-threatening ocean (7:3). The Babylonian Empire “was like a lion and had eagles’ wings”; the Medean Empire “looked like a bear”; and the Persian Empire “appeared like a leopard” (7:46).

No wild-animal comparison, however, is adequate to describe the fourth imperial kingdom of the Macedonian Greeks. Alexander’s terrible war machine—with its heavy infantry as anvil and heavy cavalry as hammer, with its twenty-foot two-handed pikes so that five ranks of lethal points intruded into the killing zone—can only be described as “different,” and Daniel does so three times (7:7, 19, 23).

Those imperial kingdoms are animal-ified (not person-ified!) “like a beast” from the disorder of the sea’s fury. By contrast, the fifth kingdom is personified “like a son of man” from the order of God’s heaven. That phrase is, by the way, simply Semitic male chauvinism for “like a human being.” That fifth kingdom, that kingdom of God, is brought down from heaven to earth by this transcendental Human One who has been entrusted with it by God, the transcendent Ancient One (7:9–13). Once again, Daniel mentions that three times (7:14, 18, 27).

Furthermore, imperial kingdoms come and go, rise and fall. But God’s kingdom was already emphasized as an “everlasting” one in earlier chapters of Daniel: “His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his sovereignty is from generation to generation” (4:3); “His sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation” (4:34); “His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end” (6:26). That theme is repeated in those just-cited quotations from 7:14, 18, 27.

Imperial kingdoms (plural) are confronted with eschatological kingdom (singular) here below upon our human earth. *Empire* is one people or nations using other peoples or nations unjustly and violently. *Eschaton* is an ordinary Greek word for “the end”—but the end of what? Negatively, it is not—emphatically not—about the end of the world. We moderns can, of course, do that in several different ways, but God would never annul the creation declared in Genesis to be “good” in each part (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and “very good” in its entirety (1:31). The eschaton is not about the destruction of the world but about its transformation into a place of justice and nonviolence. It

is not about the annihilation of the earth but about its transfiguration into a location of freedom and peace. Daniel's vision of the kingdom of God coming down from heaven to earth was an eschatological vision, and my own term for that is the Great Divine Cleanup of the World.

That Cosmic Cleanup is described as a worldwide reforging of weapons of war into implements of peace in Micah 4:3-4 = Isaiah 2:4 and as a banquet for all the earth in Isaiah 25:6-8. It is described—at the time of Jesus—as a moment when “the earth will belong equally to all, undivided by walls or fences. . . . Lives will be in common and wealth will have no division. For there will be no poor man there, no rich, and no tyrant, no slave. Further, no one will be either great or small anymore. No kings, no leaders. All will be equal together” (*Sibylline Oracles* 2.319-24).

In Daniel 7, God replaces beastlike kingdoms with a humanlike kingdom, earth-born kingdoms with a heaven-born kingdom, and as earlier in Daniel, transient kingdoms with an everlasting kingdom. It replaces—as throughout the biblical tradition—empire(s) with eschaton. But we are not told exactly how this kingdom of God is *internally* different from those kingdoms of empire. They are given external qualifications but not internal descriptions. The confrontation is quite emphatic, but what, beyond name-calling, is the intrinsic difference in content? In other words, what was the message of Jesus about the kingdom of God “as in heaven so on earth,” in the Greek word order of the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:10?

#### *ANTIPAS AND TIBERIAS*

Deep below our geological earth are giant tectonic plates that grind against one another along fault lines and produce, at very specific times and in very specific places, the surface disturbances of volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Deep below our historical world are those tectonic plates of empire and eschaton, and their clash was promised but not yet performed in Daniel 7. How was it then that—to keep my metaphor—those plates created a seismic disturbance not just in Israel or even Galilee but precisely on the northwest quadrant of the Lake of Tiberias in the 20s of the first century ce?

Here are some other ways to ask that same constitutive and generative question. Why did two popular movements, the baptism movement of John and the kingdom movement of Jesus, happen in territories ruled by Herod Antipas in the 20s of that first common-era century? What did Antipas do at that time and in that place to create resistance after a quiet rule of a quarter century? Why did Jesus leave Nazareth, “make his home in Capernaum by the

Sea” of Galilee (Matt. 4:13)? Why are there miracles with an abundance of fish (Mark 6:43; Luke 5:6; John 21:6)? Why are the most important disciples all from different fishing villages—Mary from Magdala (Luke 8:2); Peter, Andrew, and Philip from Bethsaida (John 1:44); James and John from Capernaum (Mark 1:16)? And why was their vocation to become “fishers” and not, say, “farmers” of people? Jesus in Galilee is seldom far from lake and boat and net and fish. Why?

In the generation before Jesus, Rome replaced the Hasmoneans with the Herodians and made Herod the Great “King of the Jews.” On the one hand, to ensure approval from his imperial masters, he built the great port of Sebastos—Greek for Augustus—and its adjacent city of Caesaria [AQ: **Caesarea?**] as a world-class all-weather port on Israel’s mid-Mediterranean coast. He also built temples to “Roma et Augustus”—the divine couple at the center of the new world order at that coastal Casearea, at Sebaste in Samaria, and at what would later be called Caesarea Philippi. On the other hand, to ensure approval from his Jewish subjects, he married a Hasmonean princess, Mariamme—whom he later executed. He also magnificently expanded the temple plaza to the size of fifteen football fields in another world-class construction project.

When you survey all those huge building projects, you suddenly realize that Herod the Great skipped or ignored Galilee, which was, of course, under his control. This means that the process of Romanization by urbanization for commercialization struck Galilee forcibly not in the generation of Herod the Great but in that of his son, Herod Antipas. That was also, of course, the generation of both John and Jesus.

Herod Antipas ruled the disconnected territories of Galilee (west of the Jordan) and Peraea (east of the Jordan) from 4 bce until 39 ce, that is, under three separate Roman emperors. I use what happened under the first and third to interpret what happened under the second.

In 4 bce, he went to Rome under Augustus to become King of the Jews over the entire Jewish homeland and returned not as “monarch” of the whole but simply “tetrarch” of a part. In 39 ce, he went to Rome to try again under Caligula and ended up in permanent exile as Herod Agrippa I became the next and last Rome-appointed King of the Jews. In between Augustus and Caligula was the emperor Tiberius, who ruled from 14 to 39 ce. That was when Antipas (as I interpret his actions) made his second major attempt to become Rome’s designated King of the Jews—like his father and with his father as model.

On the one hand, to ensure approval from his Roman masters, he had to increase his tax revenues without forcing his subsistence-level peasantry into

violent rebellion. His solution was to commercialize the lake by building on its shores a new capital city, naming it Tiberias after the emperor, and creating a fishing industry geared to commercial export rather than local consumption. He had already learned how to multiply the loaves in the valleys around his old capital of Sepphoris. He would now do the same for the fishes in the “Sea [now] of Tiberias” (John 6:1; 21:1).

On the other hand, to ensure approval from his Jewish subjects, he divorced his Nabatean wife and married the divorced wife of one of his half-brothers. This was Herodias, the granddaughter of the popularly beloved Mariamme, and intended a deliberate Harmonean–Herodian connection. Criticism of that marriage from both John (Mark 6:18) and Jesus (Mark 10:11–12) was, therefore, not just moral complaint but political obstruction.

By the 20s ce, Tiberias was open for business, and fishing rights on the lake changed drastically. There would have been taxes on each step of the process, and at the end, fishers would have had to sell to Antipas’s fish factories making dried and salted fish for export sale. Think of that first-century boat nursed by excellent workers with inadequate materials until it could not hold up anymore and was sunk offshore to be discovered and restored two thousand years later. “The Galilee at this time was economically depressed,” according to Shelley Wachsmann, “the timbers used in the boat’s construction are perhaps a physical expression of this overall economic situation,”<sup>1</sup> but, I would add, not so much “depressed” as oppressed.

Here, then, is where John and Jesus enter the picture. And why? If “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps. 24:1), whose is the lake and all of its fishes? That was the question of cosmic justice and covenantal righteousness as lake became microcosm of world. Was it God’s lake and God’s world, or was it Rome’s lake and Rome’s world? It was never about just *fish*. It was always about *just* fish. This is why eschaton opposed empire, the kingdom of God opposed the kingdom of Rome, John and Jesus opposed Antipas—as a seismic disturbance—in Perea for John and Galilee for Jesus in the 20s ce.

### JOHN AND JESUS

In contrasting the message of John with that of Jesus, I emphatically do not intend any cheap exaltation of the latter over the former. Indeed, I am

1. Shelley Wachsmann, *The Sea of Galilee Boat: An Extraordinary 2000 Year Old Discovery* (New York: Plenum, 1985), 358.

convinced that Jesus learned powerfully from John—learned what to believe but also what not to believe, especially about God. Furthermore, the execution of one popular prophet, John, may have protected that other one, Jesus, for a given amount of time under Herod Antipas’s prudent rule in Galilee. But I am sure that their messages were different for two main reasons.

First, even those who opposed both of them recognized that they were different from one another. “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matt. 11:18-19 = Luke 7:33-34). I bracket the name-calling but accept fasting versus feasting as an accurate insight into two different visions, missions, and messages.

Second, Jesus was certainly baptized by John. I say certainly because of the acute embarrassment in the New Testament gospels about that event—with Mark accepting it (1:9-10), Matthew protesting it (3:13-16), Luke hurrying it (3:21), and John omitting it completely (1:29-34). Yet, later, when Jesus speaks with his own voice, he distances himself—but respectfully so—from John: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11 = Luke 7:28).

In other words, the baptism movement of John was changed into or, better, replaced by the kingdom movement of Jesus—even though Matthew equates them with the same message from John (3:2) and Jesus (4:17). Next, then, I contrast them under two rubrics: the imminence or presence of the kingdom of God and the violence or nonviolence of the God of kingdom.

#### *GOD’S KINGDOM: IMMINENT OR PRESENT?*

John the Baptist was an *apocalyptic* eschatologist, a prophet with an apocalypse (Greek for a revelation) about the Great Divine Cleanup of the World. In theory, his message could have had any revelatory content about God’s kingdom. But in practice, when centuries of empires had climaxed with Rome as the strongest of them all, a first-century apocalyptic revelation had better be about the kingdom’s advent: about “how soon?”; about “if not now, when?”; and about “if not now, why?”

So John’s message was about the *imminent* advent of God’s kingdom. It was not, by the way, about—as it later became in our gospels—the imminent advent of Jesus as God’s Messiah. But since a future-but-imminent event is easy enough to proclaim, why did so many accept and follow John’s movement and message?

John believed that only sin held up God's transformative intervention (Deuteronomy 28). So he created a great sacramental and penitential renewal of the exodus. His followers were first brought out into the Peraean desert east of the Jordan and were then brought back into the Jewish homeland through that river. As they passed through it, repentance purified their souls, just as water washed their bodies. Thereafter, they were received into the promised land as a reborn people. Then, surely, said John, God would come, any day now. For surely, said John, once a critical mass of purified people were ready, God would have no further excuse for delay.

John's program was as persuasive as it was apocalyptic. When enough people "were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins," then God would arrive: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:5, 7-8). That, of course, was not originally about the coming of Jesus but of God.

What came, however, was not the kingdom of God but the cavalry of Antipas, and what happened was not an eschatological life for the world but a lonely death for John. At that point, Jesus could have taken up the fallen banner of the Baptist—as Elisha to his Elijah—and proclaimed the same message with "soon" still holding firm. But instead, Jesus performed a paradigm shift, a tradition swerve, a disruptive innovation within his contemporary apocalyptic eschatology. He proclaimed not the imminence of eschaton, but its presence, not the future-soon but the present-already of God's kingdom "as in heaven so on earth"—here and now. For example: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21; see also Luke 16:16 = Matt. 11:12-13; Luke 11:20 = Matt. 12:28; Luke 10:23b-24 = Matt. 13:16-17; Mark 2:19-20 = Matt. 9:15-16 = Luke 5:34-35; Mark 1:14b-15 = Matt. 4:17).

It is hard, however, to realize how absurd that proclamation must have sounded to its first hearers. Where, they would have asked Jesus, is God's transfigured world to be seen? Are not Tiberius still emperor of Rome, Antipas still tetrarch of Galilee, and Pilate still prefect of Judea? How has anything changed in a world of peasant poverty, local injustice, and imperial oppression?

In answer, Jesus proclaimed another—and necessarily concomitant—aspect of his paradigm shift within contemporary eschatological expectation. You have been waiting for God, he said, while God has been waiting for you. No wonder nothing is happening. You want God's intervention, he said, while God wants your collaboration. Kingdom is here, but only insofar as you accept it, enter it,

live it, and thereby establish it. Collaboration with God, Jesus might have said, is but another word for covenant with God.

That is why Jesus did not settle down at Nazareth or Capernaum and have his companions bring others to him. Instead, he sent them out to do exactly what he himself was doing: heal the sick, eat with the healed, and demonstrate the kingdom's presence in that reciprocity and mutuality (Mark 6:6-13; Matt. 10:1-14; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12). God's Great Cleanup of the World does not begin, cannot continue, and will not conclude without our divinely empowered participation and transcendently driven collaboration. That is the message and challenge of Jesus.

#### *GOD'S CHARACTER: VIOLENT OR NONVIOLENT?*

John's message involved the imminent advent of an avenging God of retributive justice. Recall his metaphors of the swinging ax and the falling tree (Matt. 3:10 = Luke 3:9) or the winnowing fork and the burning chaff (Matt. 3:12 = Luke 3:17). Indeed, Luke had to balance that "wrath to come" language (Matt. 3:7 = Luke 3:7) with his own more gentle ethical insert (3:10-14).

But John was wrong, terribly, tragically wrong. He announced the immediate advent of an avenging God, and what came was the immediate advent of an avenging tetrarch. Herod Antipas, the Rome-appointed governor of Galilee, arrested and executed John. And God did nothing—no intervention and no prevention. John died in lonely isolation in Antipas's southern fortress of Machaerus east of the Jordan. And God did nothing—no intervention and no prevention. And in my interpretation, Jesus watched, Jesus learned, and Jesus changed.

Jesus called for eschatological collaboration—not, however, with a God of violent retributive justice but with a God of nonviolent distributive justice. Recall the reason Jesus gave for nonviolent resistance to evil: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44) or "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:28). But why? "So that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:45, 48). Like God, like Jesus, we are called to nonviolent resistance to the violent normalcy of civilization. We are called, *with* God, to take back God's world, *for* God.

Internally, we can see Jesus' earliest followers struggled with that absolute nonviolent mode of resistance to evil. It meant not only no attacks but also no defenses! You can see, for example, how the peasant vision struggled between

“staff” (Mark 6:8) and “no-staff” (Matt. 10:10 = Luke 9:3) or the aristocratic vision struggled between “sword” (Luke 22:35–38) and “no sword” (Luke 22:49–52). To all of that, Jesus said, “Enough of this!” and “No more of this!” (Luke 22:38, 51).

Externally, and universally, the strongest witness to Jesus’ message of nonviolent resistance to violence is the judgment of Pilate, Rome’s governor of Israel. Paula Fredriksen built her 1999 book, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, around the “incontrovertible fact” that, “though Jesus was executed as a political insurrectionist, his followers were not.”<sup>2</sup> I do not interpret that crucial insight to mean that Pilate thought Jesus was completely innocent but that, while guilty of nonviolent resistance, he was innocent of violent intentions.

Compare, for example, that parable about Barabbas who “was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection” (Mark 15:7). Jesus met the precise fate of public but nonviolent resistance to Roman law and order. In terms of his imperial mandate, Pilate was quite correct: public execution for Jesus but no communal arrest for his companions.

That was illustrated powerfully in another parable about the interaction between Pilate and Jesus in John’s gospel. “My kingdom,” said Jesus in 18:36a, “is not of this world” (KJV) or “is not from this world” (NRSV). We often cite the sentence only up to that point and thereby make it extremely ambiguous. Does it mean not about present but future? Not about earth but heaven? Not about politics but religion? Not about the exterior but the interior life?

Jesus continued, however, and made all those preliminary interpretations irrelevant: If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” [AQ: Please add an opening quote mark, or delete the closing quote.] (18:36b). I leave aside John’s standard prejudice about “the Jews” to emphasize the structure of that sentence. That repeated “[AQ: is?] [= not] . . . from this world” and “not from here” frame what cannot and did not happen. The followers of Jesus did not “fight,” did not use violence even to attempt his release.

The difference between God’s kingdom and Rome’s empire, between Jesus and Pilate, between Jesus’ companions and Pilate’s followers is nonviolence as opposed to violence. Violence cannot be used even to protect or free Jesus. The coming of God’s kingdom, the dawn of eschatological transformation, the Great Divine Cleanup of the World—by whatever name—is nonviolent and so

2. Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* [AQ: Please add city and publisher], (1999), 9; see also *ibid.*, 11, 240, 255.

also is our God-empowered participation in it and God-driven collaboration with it.

That is, for me, the message of Jesus. It was summed up far better than I have just done by two African bishops who lived at either end of that continent and almost a millennium and a half apart. First, Augustine of Hippo in a sermon of 416: “God made you without you. He doesn’t justify you without you.” Then, Desmond Tutu of Cape Town in a sermon of 1999 and in a magnificent misquotation: “St. Augustine says, ‘God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot.’”

### OPENING STATEMENT

By Ben Witherington III

Sometimes in the study of the message of Jesus, we have all been guilty of missing the forest due to the overanalysis of interesting individual trees. I am reminded of the famous saying of John Muir the naturalist, who once suggested that we look at life from the back side of a beautiful tapestry. Normally, what we see are individual loose ends, knots, threads here and there. But occasionally, when the light shines through the tapestry, it dawns on us that there is a larger design, a weaving together of darks and lights with purpose, pattern, rich color. My presentation here will focus not so much on individual sayings of Jesus but rather on the storied world, the narrative thought world which generated all of his teachings.

It was G. B. Caird who said that Jesus was the starting point and goal of New Testament theology. He meant this in several ways. For one thing, in the thought world of the earliest Christians, there is continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and between Jesus and the risen Lord. Caird put it this way: “Without the Jesus of history the Christ of faith becomes a Docetic figure, a figment of pious imagination who, like Alice’s Cheshire cat, ultimately disappears from view.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, that happens all too regularly in Christian discussions of Jesus, which is why I am starting this discussion with an examination of Jesus’ narrative thought world, which most certainly influenced that of his earliest followers, who, like him, were Torah-loving Jews. It was Caird’s view (and I think he is right) that human experience is the point at which theology is grounded in history.<sup>4</sup> It was the experiencing of the risen Lord or the experiencing of conversion to Christ that led to the Copernican

3. G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 346.

4. *Ibid.*, 347.

revolution in the thinking of those Jews who became Christians after Easter. Later, it was the worshiping of Christ that led to rethinking his significance and how to tell his story.<sup>5</sup> These sorts of things caused the earliest Christians to go back and reevaluate what the historical Jesus had said and done, and particularly to reevaluate his own teaching. What sort of worldview had undergirded and been articulated in Jesus' teaching?

Without question, Jesus was one of the great sages of all time, and that included being a great storyteller. Whether we consider his original parables or his creative handling of Old Testament stories, he was quite the improviser, to say the least. He lived out of and spoke into a rich storied world, and he told his own and others' tales in light of the dawning eschatological realities. Not surprisingly, his storied world is populated chiefly by Old Testament figures and stories, alluded to, retold, and recycled in various ways, but also his storied world involves the spinning out of new tales, often in the form of parables or visionary remarks (e.g., "I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky"; Luke 10:18). The function of Jesus' discourse was not merely to inform but also to transform, and that transformation was to involve not merely the audience's symbolic universe but also its behavior in relationship to God as well as in relationship to each other. In other words, there was both a theological and an ethical thrust to Jesus' teaching. The stories were meant to transform not only the religious imagination of the audience but also their praxis, giving them samples and examples of how to believe and behave in the light of the inbreaking dominion of God.

If there is a difference in thrust in the way Jesus articulated his eschatological worldview from that of his predecessor John the Baptizer, it is that Jesus, even in his more apocalyptic sayings, tended to emphasize the good news about the coming of the dominion of God on earth. "The object of winnowing is not to collect enough chaff to have a glorious bonfire; it is to gather the wheat into the granary; the bonfire is purely incidental."<sup>6</sup> Thus, Jesus set about to rescue the perishing and to free Israel from its various forms of bondage. In this, Jesus is not trying to be Israel, any more than the Twelve were set up initially to be Israel. All of them were trying to free Israel through a mission of preaching, teaching, and healing. There was, however, urgency and corporate focus to what they did. "The disciples were not evangelistic preachers sent out to save individual souls for some unearthly paradise. They were couriers proclaiming a national emergency and conducting a referendum

5. On which, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

6. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 360.

on a question of national survival.”<sup>7</sup> The storm of judgment was looming on the horizon for the Jewish faith centered on temple, territory, and Torah. God was intervening in Jesus and his followers before this disaster happened, just as he had already intervened through John the Baptizer. It is this context of social unrest and sense of impending doom that we must keep in view when considering the way Jesus articulates his thought world and the urgency with which he stresses certain things.

This line of discussion raises the issue of the relationship of Jesus to Israel. I suggest that Jesus presents himself not as Israel but rather as the Son of Man, and as the Son of Man, he is Adam gone right. That is, the scope of his messianic ministry is much broader than fulfilling the promise of being the ultimate Son of David, restoring Israel and its reign in the Holy Land. That is a part of what Jesus is about, but only a part. The temptation scenes make clear that something more wide-ranging and more cosmic is at stake, for Jesus is tempted as Son of God, not as Israel or Son of David. The issue is what sort of Son of God was Jesus to be. Was it one that comported with his being the true Son of Man of Danielic prophecy or not?

Of course, Jesus spoke to a different audience than did his later Christian followers. Every single one of the New Testament documents is written for Christians, even if in some cases written for Christians to use in some form with outsiders. Jesus, on the other hand, was addressing Jews, even when he was addressing his disciples, and so he was able to presuppose the storied world of the Old Testament as something that he and his audience shared. This perhaps explains why Jesus was able to simply allude to figures such as the queen of the South (Matt. 12:41-42 par.), or Noah (Matt. 24:36-41), or a widow in Zarephath (Luke 4:26) and expect the audience to know who he meant. It is no surprise that many of the figures from the past that Jesus spoke of, including both the queen of the South and Noah, were associated with judgments past and future. According to Matt. 12:38-40 (cf. Matt. 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32), the only “sign” that a wicked generation would get out of Jesus was the sign of Jonah, that reluctant crisis intervention specialist called upon to warn the people Nineveh of impending disaster if they did not repent. Jonah 3:4 says the Ninevites were warned that if they did not repent, destruction would fall upon them within forty days. Jesus offers a similar warning in Mark 13, except that the clock is set to forty years. Luke, in his relating of this sort of teaching, makes it all the more explicit that Jesus meant the destruction of Jerusalem by human armies, namely, Roman armies (Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24; 23:27-31).

7. *Ibid.*, 361.

It is interesting, however, that most of the stories Jesus told were of his own making, stories about contemporaries and contemporary things, such as the coming of God's eschatological saving activity. As we read through even just the narrative parables, we find anonymous human figures providing examples of various sorts. Only the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus presents a story about a named individual human being (Luke 16:19-31). Even more interesting is the fact that God is portrayed as an actor in various of these parables: he is the owner of the vineyard in the parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-11) and the forgiving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Most importantly, we discover that Jesus provides an example of how to do theology and ethics in story form, for these stories are about both divine activity and human responses of various sorts.

There is also a dark edge to the stories that Jesus tells, when it comes to the evaluation of his own people. By this, I mean that they are portrayed as lost (see Luke 15), and their leaders as those who reject God's emissaries the prophets and even his Son (Matt. 23:29-39). The eschatological situation is portrayed as drastic, with all sorts of unexpected persons trying to race through the narrow gate into the kingdom, while the invited guests have snubbed the host and either have refused to come or have come late and without the appropriate attire. Pious Jews are going away from temple prayer unjustified while tax collectors are being accepted. There is some sort of drastic reversal of normal expectations happening as the dominion breaks into human history, and it does not bode well for the faithful elder brothers of the family, it would appear. God is busy vindicating the oppressed, liberating the lost, enfranchising the least and last, and changing the guest list at the messianic banquet. These are stories about the upsetting of a highly stratified world, about the changing of the guard, about new occasions teaching new duties, about both judgment and redemption catching Jews by surprise, and perhaps most of all about the need for repentance by one and all as God's divine saving activity is happening in their midst, and yet many are blind to it.

The storied world that Jesus tells of has not only a dark edge but also a strangeness. Good shepherds do not normally leave ninety-nine sheep to rescue one straggler. People do not plant a weed such as a mustard bush, as it only attracts the wrong sort of birds and attention. God is not like an unjust judge who has to be forced into vindicating a persistent widow. We could go on. Jesus is offering new perspectives on old images and ideas and, in some cases, new perspectives on new vistas and horizons that are coming into view.

N. T. Wright rightly senses what is going on in Jesus' ministry when he says, "The crucial element in his prophetic activity was the story, both implicit

and explicit, that he was telling and acting out. It was Israel's story reaching its climax: the long-awaited moment has arrived! . . . To say 'the kingdom of God is at hand' makes sense only when the hearers know 'the story thus far' and are waiting for it to be completed."<sup>8</sup>

And precisely because Jesus is operating in the Jewish ethos of *eretz Yisrael* (land of Israel), he can presuppose a storied world context that most of the writers of the New Testament cannot presuppose. This may well explain why indeed we find no parables outside the Gospels. It is because we are no longer speaking into Jesus' specific world, a world where sapiential Jewish thinking with an eschatological twist made sense.

In its own context, then, how would Jesus' articulation of his vision in stories have been heard? Again Wright helps us: "It would clearly *both* challenge some prevailing assumptions within that Jewish context *and* retain a special focus which would be characteristic only of Jesus' career, not the work of his post-Easter followers. It must be set within Judaism, but as a challenge; it must be the presupposition for the church, but not the blueprint."<sup>9</sup>

Just so, and this means that it is crucial to get the balance right between continuity and discontinuity when it comes to assessing the storied world of Jesus and of his post-Easter followers. And again, the point of the parables is to reorder the thinking of Jews: "The parables offer not only information, but challenge; they are stories designed to evoke fresh praxis, to reorder the symbolic world, to break open current understandings and inculcate fresh ones."<sup>10</sup>

A good example to examine closely is the parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1-9. Here, as Wright observes, we have the revolutionary notion that Jesus is the person who is bringing the story of Israel to a climax in his own ministry. "If we fail to see how profoundly subversive, how almost suicidally dangerous, such a claim was," it is because we have tended to turn Jesus' counter-order wisdom speech into innocuous sermon illustrations.<sup>11</sup> It is right to say that when we are dealing with the narrative parables, we need to follow the narrative logic of the story, not assume that these are thinly veiled allegories of history in detail. At the same time, there are allegorical elements in Jesus' parables, and especially perhaps this one. Modern distinctions between parable and allegory are not all that helpful when it comes to ancient Jewish storytelling.<sup>12</sup> Who, then, is the

8. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christians Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 226.

9. *Ibid.*, 226.

10. *Ibid.*, 229.

11. *Ibid.*, 235.

sower in this parable? Along with most commentators, I agree that it is Jesus, assuming a divine role here of planting God's word about the dominion in surprising as well as familiar places.

There are some surprising results of following this narrative logic. For one thing, Jesus is not sanguine that most of those who hear him will respond positively in the long term. He is unlike the naive and overly optimistic preacher of today. But what is perhaps most telling about this parable is that Jesus expects rejection and ephemeral positive responses. He expects too much competition to allow his message to grow in the hearts of many. He expects absolute, hard-hearted rejection. And yes, in the good soil he expects good, long-lasting results.

This is an odd message for a person who saw himself in a messianic light, as one who had come to rescue Israel from disaster. In a sense, it is a message about the end of one thought world and the unexpected beginnings of another out of the ashes of the first one. In Jesus' view, his world is hell-bent, not heaven bound, and he, like John the Baptizer, is here to try to rescue a few of the perishing before the dark night of judgment falls. This parable differs considerably from the one in Mark 12:1-11 about the wicked tenants, as that is a commentary on Jewish leadership in the vineyard, not about the state of the Jewish vineyard in general. But both parables presuppose that things are coming to a climax, and that God's last-ditch efforts to rescue his people are culminating in the ministry of Jesus, who seeks to reclaim God's land, his vineyard, before it produces nothing but the grapes of wrath.

Along with Wright, I think the aforementioned parables in Mark 4 and Mark 12 would have been seen as echoing or alluding to Isaiah 5-6. In this light, there can be no question but that the vineyard is Israel, and Jesus sees himself as fulfilling a prophetic role like that of Isaiah, dealing with hard-of-hearing Israel. But what is most telling when we closely read Isaiah 5-6 and then think of these two parables of Jesus is that, already in Isaiah, the theme of impending judgment and the exile of God's Jewish people is clear. In this context, the use of parables reflects and indeed presupposes the hard-heartedness of the audience and their refusal to listen. They will not hear and understand unless they turn or repent. Listen to some of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard:

What more could have been done for my vineyard  
than I have done for it?  
When I looked for good grapes,

12. On which, see Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); idem, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

why did it yield only bad?  
 Now I will tell you  
 what I am going to do to my vineyard:  
 I will take away its hedge,  
 and it will be destroyed;  
 I will break down its wall  
 and it will be trampled.  
 (Isa. 5:4-5, author's translation)

The song is a lament that goes on to bemoan the injustice and bloodshed in Israel.

Here is where I say that this all comports nicely with Jesus' prediction of the demise of the temple and Jerusalem in Mark 13. In Jesus' view, as his prophetic sign-act in the temple showed, this temple was the temple of doom, one that God would judge within a generation. And indeed, exactly one biblical generation after Jesus died in ad 30, the temple fell in Jerusalem to the Romans. Jesus was no false prophet any more than Isaiah was in regard to the demise of Jerusalem and exile in his own era. In light of all this, it is interesting that the later Christian followers of Jesus not only continued to evangelize Jews and see God as promising them much, but also, as a text such as Romans 11 shows, continued to believe that God, though he might temporarily break off from his people those who did not accept Jesus as their messiah, would not replace an unresponsive Jewish people with a more responsive Gentile one. This is surprising only to those who do not know the regular pattern in the Old Testament prophetic oracles of redemption of Israel after and indeed as a result of judgment on Israel (see, e.g., Hosea, Amos, and of course, Isaiah). Perhaps most radically and paradoxically, Jesus was suggesting in Mark 4 that God's radical rescue of his people would come not by means of military action or a warrior-messiah but rather through the call and response of Jesus' preaching of the good news.

This brings us to the other seed parables in Mark 4. Jesus seems to think there will be some "seedy" characters—indeed, some characters that Jews would consider "for the birds" (cf. Dan. 4:20-22) in the dominion—to the surprise of the longtime dwellers there. Hence, Jesus tells the parable of the Mustard Seed, a seed that no Jewish farmer would ever plant in a garden. The parable of the Mustard Seed is a parable of contrast between small beginnings and large, if noxious and surprising, outcomes, but it is also a parable that tells us what sort of persons are going to end up in the vineyard: the wild birds from afar, which should probably be seen as an allusion to Gentiles.

The parable of the Seed Growing Secretly tells us something about the method by which the dominion is coming: secretly, under the radar, without a lot of human effort, and certainly without violence. This parable can be fruitfully compared to the parable of the Leaven in the Dough (Matt. 13:33 // Luke 13:20-21) in that both suggest a sort of automatic process, one without human aid that produces the result. The hiddenness theme is also evident in the parables of the Pearl of Great Price and the Treasure in the Field (Matt. 13:44-46). There are apocalyptic overtones to all these parables as they emerge from a world of opacity, of secrets that require teasing the brain into active thought to figure out, of God producing a crop and a harvest or a treasure as if by sleight of hand. The harvest theme is a dead giveaway that Jesus believed that the eschatological scenario was already in play.

And here precisely is where I differ strongly with Wright. These are not parables about return from exile. If anything, they are parables about the surprising presence of God's saving activity in the midst of occupation and oppression in the Holy Land, a very different message indeed. Jesus did not come to meet the audience's messianic expectations; he came to meet their needs. But ultimately, that task could be consummated only through a sacrifice on a cross and its sequel. Redemption would not come on the cheap or even just by a spiritual revival of good preaching accompanied by some miracles. The sin problem would not be dealt with or overcome by those means alone. And this brings us to another crucial point.

Did Jesus tell stories about himself? One could argue that Jesus appears in some of the parables. For example, in Mark 4, he seems to be the sower, and in Mark 12, it seems clear enough that he is the Son who is rejected, killed, and thrown out of the vineyard. We could perhaps also suggest that in the parable of the Lost Sheep, he is the shepherd, or in the parable of the Lost Coin, he is the woman seeking the coin (see Luke 15:3-10). But these parables in the main are not about the king Jesus; they are about the coming of the kingdom of God.

When Jesus referred to himself, he chose a phrase that we do not find in any of the parables: the "Son of Man." A close examination of his use of this term shows that, at least a good bit of the time, he was alluding to the story of that enigmatic "one like a son of man" in Dan. 7:13-14, the one who would be given a kingdom by God and would rule and judge the earth forever. This is especially clear in a saying such as that in Mark 14:62, but it is also in evidence in other Son of Man sayings, even in the Johannine tradition (see John 1:51; 3:13; 8:28). Jesus, it appears, exegeted his own career, purpose, existence, and importance out of various Old Testament stories, and I suggest that this influenced the various christological hymns that his earliest followers created

after Easter. The link between the proclaimer and becoming the one proclaimed becomes clearer when we realize that Jesus also exegeted himself out of the story of Wisdom. This is especially clear in various places in Matthew 11, especially Matt. 11:19, where Jesus calls himself Wisdom directly. Then, too, we must point to a text such as Mark 12:35–37, where Jesus cleverly intimates in his interpretation of Psalm 110 that the Messiah is in fact not just David’s son, but even greater than that, he is David’s Lord; and in either case, he is alluding to himself here. Jesus himself, then, provided the catalyst for interpreting and exegeting his significance out of the prophetic and wisdom literature of early Judaism.

Jesus is not merely telling a story or carrying a story already in play forward to its logical climax. This becomes quite clear in, for example, his “yoke” saying (Matt. 11:28–30), where it is Jesus’ yoke that his disciples are to take upon themselves with rigor and vigor, not the yoke of the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law, having been fulfilled in the Christ event, would not provide the ethical script for all Christian conduct going forward; rather, the law of Christ would do so. Of course, this would be confusing, because some elements of the Mosaic law would be renewed or reaffirmed or intensified by Christ—for example, the Great Commandment—and thus would be part of the binding contract known as the New Covenant. But Christ’s followers would do these things because they were part of Christ’s yoke, which he commanded his disciples to take up, called, paradoxically, a light burden. They would not merely continue the story of obedience (and disobedience) of Israel to Moses’ law.

However subversive or paradoxical the later Christian message may have seemed or have been, and however much Christian preachers may have relied on Jesus’ message, even his message about himself, they did not by and large follow Jesus’ methodology of preaching. They told the story straight. Partly this had to do with ethos and social context, since most audiences outside Israel were not well schooled in Jewish sapiential literature. Partly also, however, this had to do with the change in symbolic universe from before to after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The proclaimer had become the universally proclaimed, and this because of the way his life turned out. Apparently, it was felt that the message about a crucified and risen Messiah was paradoxical enough in itself, and required enough explaining in itself, that an evangelistic religion needed to tell the story in a clear and straightforward way. While some of the themes of the “good news” song and part of the tune remained the same, the lyrics needed to be less enigmatic and more singularly focused on Jesus himself and his redemptive work.

It was the Frenchman Alfred Loisy who famously once said Jesus preached the kingdom, but it was the church that showed up. What Loisy did not really grasp, it would appear, is that what Jesus was preaching was the divine saving intervention of God through his own ministry and that of his disciples, and in this sense, it certainly did show up both during and after the life of the historical Jesus. Without the coming of the Son of Man, there would have been no good news of the kingdom, and without his death, resurrection, and return, there would have been no completion to the arc of the story Jesus believed he was living out—the story in Daniel 7 of the one like a son of man who came down from heaven to rule forever on earth and to be worshipped by every tribe and tongue and people and nation. In Daniel 7, we see the harmonic convergence in the key elements in Jesus’ message: kingdom of God and Son of Man, and it was, and is, and ever shall be only the latter that brings the former on earth, as it is in heaven.

I would like to close with a story. Shelly Jackson, a gifted contemporary writer, has set out on a remarkable project to en flesh a story of hers, quite literally. The story has 2,095 words and is entitled “Skin.” She has asked for volunteers from all over the world to have exactly one word of the story tattooed on some readily visible part of their skin. Not only has she had some takers, she has had more takers than she needs to tell this story in the flesh, to incarnate this story on living human beings.

What if the message of Jesus can only be truly and fully understood not only when it is set in the larger context of Jesus’ own narrative thought world, but when it is incarnated in us, and only together as a living group can we make sense of it, with each one of us having but one piece of the puzzle to contribute to that understanding of the story? What if the message of Jesus can only be understood and believed when it is experienced and lived out in *koinonia*, in community, in love, in self-sacrifice, in service to others? I suspect that since Hurricane Katrina, those of you who live in New Orleans and have participated in the recovery efforts may well have gotten a glimpse of how true that is. We are not, or at least ought not to be, merely witnesses as the saints go marching in. Rather, we have or should become part of “that number,” part of the Grand Narrative, a story in which we become what we admire, we become like the one we emulate, and so when the story is lived out through us, we come to understand and believe in the Son of Man and his kingdom, and so reflect his indelible image, renewed in us.

## DIALOGUE

**Witherington:** I completely agree with you about that; if you want to call him a nonviolent revolutionary, I'm good with that. But the question is, what is he fighting against? He's not mainly fighting against the Roman Empire. He knew the stories in Daniel. Beastly empires come, and beastly empires go, and the Son of Man is the one who replaces all those inhuman and inhumane empires. He's not so much an eschatologist that he believes he's bringing the final, human empire. And the best way to do that is by doing the positive thing of rescuing the perishing. So I don't think the focus is one eye on Rome and . . . I think the focus is on rescuing the least, the last, and the lost, etc. If that has implications for the Roman Empire, so be it.

**Crossan:** I think that is right. Jesus has a positive vision. (I'll get to Daniel 7 in a minute.) Jesus definitely, absolutely—I'm embarrassed to have to say it—has a positive vision. It is not as if he is just against Rome, and if Rome went away, everything would be fine. But from the time of the Exodus, that positive vision has been against empire—every time you find an empire mentioned right up to Daniel—Egyptians, Assyrians, and the whole dreary line. The Romans are the last, and empires are getting stronger. Empires are not getting weaker; they are getting stronger. So I think it would be profoundly naive of Jesus, since he emphatically has a positive vision and knows what happened to John the Baptist, not to recognize the danger of his own mission. The Baptist also had a positive vision; he wasn't just against Antipas. But Antipas knew he needed to be executed, so somehow his positive vision is against a positive alternative.

**Witherington:** I guess the other thing that struck me is that I don't want to marginalize or neglect the evidence of Roman presence in Galilee or anywhere else. I don't think that that's all about what day-to-day Jewish life was like in those places. Whether you go to Yodfat or go to the new synagogue in Migdal, they were getting on with their own positive Jewish religious life. It was profoundly religious, and you know that the evidence of an impressive temple domination system that's sort of taken over the land, or you've got these large estate owners who have wrung everybody dry—I just don't hear that in Jesus' parables very much. I think there's something to that with Herod Antipas, but I don't really think it's the heart of the matter.

**Crossan:** In the 150 years from, say, the death of Herod, there were four violent revolts against the Romans—three in the Jewish homeland and one across North Africa. In that same period, there were at least four major

nonviolent resistance movements: I am thinking of Judas the Galilean in the time of the census; I am thinking of the disputes with Pilate, about the iconic standards and the aqueduct expenses, probably around 26 ce; and I'm thinking of what Philo and Josephus tell us about Caligula's statue and the nonviolent resistance of tens of thousands of devout Jews. So both violent resistance and nonviolent resistance were going on before, during, and after Jesus, at least up to ad 41. I don't think everyone was quietly going about business as usual.

Another important matter is that, about the time Jesus was born, a legion was burning down the nearby city of Sepphoris, according to Josephus. I am here using some presuppositions from my own Irish tradition, that when the imperial forces—legions or dragoons—have been in your neighborhood, your little villages remember it for several generations. I cannot imagine that Jesus, growing up in Nazareth, would not find the day the Romans destroyed Sepphoris to be a major topic of conversation in his young life. I cannot imagine it!

**Witherington:** Jesus never mentioned Sepphoris or Tiberius whatsoever. I'm not saying that the presence isn't there; I'm not saying that over a cup of gruel or whatever they were eating, they might not have discussed these matters. I'm certainly not saying that there were no Jewish Zealots. I'm saying that the Zealot party didn't represent the majority of Jews. They were one part of Judaism, and it's not clear to me that most Jews were in sympathy with all of the Zealots, or at least with their violent tactics. How do we explain that the city of Jerusalem goes from 50,000 to 500,000 during pilgrim season, and they're involved in the temple at length? These folks are not like the Qumranites. They think that it's OK; the temple may not be perfect, and the rulers may be bad, but how's that different from America now? The political system may be somewhat broken, but they're getting on with their religion, and that has everything to do with celebrating Passover and the other feasts, and for them, this is a positive thing.

**Crossan:** I am not talking about either the temple authorities or the Zealots. I am talking about ordinary everyday life, and I think actually that the first century in the Jewish homeland was a pressure cooker. Of course they went about their life—people do that even in the most horrible situations we can imagine—but to leave out the whole Roman presence just doesn't make sense. Let me put it this way: If Jesus had lived, did everything we know he did, and just died in his own bed, he must have been talking only about the interior life, because Rome is not paying attention, no one is bothered by it. If

Rome ignored Jesus, then his message can't have to do with who controlled the earth. So I am, I suppose, starting Jesus' life with the destruction of Sepphoris in 4 ce, and if I took that out, I could easily be persuaded the Romans were just background and nobody was paying attention.

**Witherington:** I think the issue is getting the balance right and getting the tensions right. I have no hesitation saying that Jesus was crucified by the Romans. They are responsible for his death, and why that didn't spring up in Christianity later as a type of anti-Italianism, I don't know. But Jesus was not crucified by Jews, and so it is certainly the case then that the question becomes why? Jesus either made, or they made for him, some messianic claims, and he didn't reject those messianic claims. This was sure to look like treason to a frustrated Pilate, who was an anti-Semite anyway. So maybe he didn't want to do it during the Passover season, but he certainly did. He was ruthless enough to have done it at any point really. So, yes, there is absolutely a clash between Jesus and his kingdom, which is not of this world, and Pilate, who's all about kingdom in this world. There is no doubt about that, but I don't see that as either characterizing or defining the teaching and message of Jesus over and over again. Nor do I think he mainly defines kingdom over against the Roman Empire. I think he defines it in light of his understanding of the sacred Scriptures.

**Crossan:** But I would simply say that Jesus' life focused Scripture against empire. Let me go back to Daniel and emphasize what was mentioned in Daniel 7. You know as well as I do that Daniel 7 starts off with those "beastly" empires. We really get that: the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Macedonians (they don't have a beast for Alexander—he's just totally "different"—no feral beast is adequate to represent the horrors of Alexander's war machine), and Syrians. But they are all judged by God in heaven, and for me, that means that imperialism itself is condemned. And then you get the Son of Man to whom the kingdom of God is given to bring it down to earth. I would precisely take Daniel 7, if I'm looking for a text, as a major matrix—Daniel 7, and then of course Mark, when Mark talks about the Son of Man being already on earth. I don't know how Mark could possibly say that unless he is thinking that the kingdom of God is already here as well. So not everything depends on how you translate the Greek of "has come near" in Mark 1:15. If the Son of Man is already on earth, the kingdom of God is already here.

**Witherington:** I agree.

**Crossan:** But the empires are there, too. I don't want to leave out one or the other.

**Witherington:** Well, OK, I'm all right with that, but it seems to me that one of the issues here is a profoundly theological issue: In what sense did an early Jew like Jesus believe in the sovereignty of God? It seems to me that if Jesus is not a Zealot, if he's a nonviolent revolutionary, then he believes that God can work all things together for good. So how is he going to get on with the project of bringing the kingdom on earth? He is going to gather disciples, he is going to teach them, he is going to present a positive message, and he's going to go forward that way. And he's not going to spend most of his time worrying about the Roman Empire or critiquing it. He's going to be getting on with the positive task of ministry at hand because he believes that it's in God's hands.

I'm not talking about somebody who's withdrawn to a monastery in order simply to be pious. I believe there are absolutely social implications to what Jesus says—radical social implications to some of things he says. No question. It is not just about theology. It's about praxis, but the praxis that he's enunciating and that they carried over the divide of Golgotha into the early church, looks very much like what the early Christians were doing in Jerusalem, according to Acts 3 and 4 and 5 and 6: they were a movement wishing to proclaim the Jewish Messiah first to Jews, then to others, and they believed that way to change the world.

**Crossan:** I get nervous about terms like *social implications*, because I think the core issue is, to whom does the earth belong? Any Roman would have said it belongs to us. If you like it in theological terms, they might say, our Jupiter took it from your Yahweh, and it's still ours. But what if you refuse that imperial claim and actually believe that the earth belongs to God and the Land of Israel belongs to God? But of course, for a Josephus, it's no problem at all. It's not the slightest problem that the Romans are in charge of the world—under God. But if you actually take the biblical God seriously, then it creates this issue for you: Who's in charge of the world, and how should it be run? I don't want to talk about social implications; I want to talk about God and God's world.

**Witherington:** You know I would not want to paint an image of Jesus as sort of a Jewish version of the Amish: let's withdraw from the world and create our own little pious, glorious anachronism and call it good. No. I don't think

that's what Jesus is about, nor do I think Dick Horsley is right that Jesus was running around creating little base camps all over Galilee for you to have a sort of ferment that would be like yeast and to create a society that would be anti-Roman. I don't see him doing that either, so it's hard to get how we can say that there were always social dimensions for the teaching of Jesus, rather than social implications to the teaching of Jesus. The question is what kind?

**Crossan:** I suppose my problem is that we've always talked as if there were a social gospel over here . . .

**Witherington:** Right.

**Crossan:** . . . but there is some kind of other gospel over there.

**Witherington:** Right.

**Crossan:** If there were the social gospel distinct from the other gospel, one could say, "Well, I do the other gospel." But what I am trying to say is that the good news, as I see it, is that the world belongs to God. I don't know any empire that really would accept that statement. If you say the church belongs to God, no problem. But, if you say that the world belongs to God, that immediately raises issues about how the world should be run. That's why I am trying not to put any sort of division between the "social dimensions" of Christianity and Christianity itself. I realize the language problem we have created by talking of a "social gospel" (I myself never use that redundancy). There is only one gospel, and it is, at once, religious and political, theological, social, and economic.

**Witherington:** My own spiritual forebearer, John Wesley, said there is no spiritual gospel without the social gospel, and equally, there is no social gospel without spiritual gospel. These are two parts of the one and singular gospel of Jesus, and I believe that wholeheartedly, and I certainly don't believe Jesus was so heavenly minded that he was no earthly good. I certainly don't believe that. So I guess where the conversation needs to go forward is, what's that look like? What is Jesus actually doing in terms of his praxis that it is a game changer in terms of the social milieu? Maybe you could ask it that way.

**Crossan:** I think that would get close to it. Because what we are really saying, as I see both of us, is that Jesus' vision is radical. Now, I would be

horrified if somebody said that Jesus is simply against the Romans, as though if the Romans went away, then everything would be just fine.

**Witherington:** No.

**Crossan:** And then we'd have a Christian Empire or something. It simply isn't true. Rome happens to be the current incarnation of the alternative that the world belongs to imperial power. So Jesus is not just negatively against Rome, and again I couldn't agree with you more on that point. Jesus has a positive vision—if Rome weren't there, the positive vision would still be there—but it seems to me that a positive vision of divine sovereignty really is an affront to the normalcy of civilization (if I can use that term), because the normalcy of civilization has been imperial for at least six thousand years.

**Witherington:** What we're struggling against—and, Dom, I think you would probably agree with this—is the privatization of sin, making sin a purely individual matter that has nothing to do with the structures of society, nothing to do with governments, etc. The problem where we are—living in the most radically individualistic country in human history—is that we have this huge disconnect. For most people, when they hear the gospel of Jesus, they think it's all about Jesus and their pea-pickin' heart being saved. The truth of the matter is that, of course, that's part of what Jesus is dealing with, and it's certainly what one part or the other of the New Testament writers are dealing with, but it's about saving of the world, not just individuals, from sin. And that doesn't mean that there isn't a critique of the structures of society. That does mean that there are various things you're doing to work for change in society, but it's going to be done in a nonviolent way.

**Crossan:** I was asked about Satan. A lot of people think that evil is only individual and personal, but there are also satanic structures and systems that are sort of mysterious—you don't quite know where they come from. They are a line item in the budget that guarantees that six months from now, some people who don't vote are going to get very badly hurt. Those are satanic structures. I agree with you wholeheartedly that we have swung over to a privatization and individualization with both sin and Satan.

**Witherington:** And would you agree as well with this? I try to emphasize that although the gospel is a deeply personal matter, it's never a private matter. One of the problems in America with the separation of church and state is

that we also have what I would call a postmodern situation that is increasingly gnostic, i.e., we have a separation of the spiritual from the physical, and the spiritual from the historical. And I see that as a very dangerous move either within or outside of Christianity in terms of spirituality.

**Crossan:** I cannot even imagine anyone in the biblical tradition thinking any of this is private. It is, of course, personal. But you cannot be personally holy and socially unholy. And you probably cannot be socially holy, I suspect, without being personally holy. So that's another matter we have to think about dialectically. They are two sides of a coin; you can distinguish them, but you can't separate them. I don't think it's possible to be personally holy in God's world without being socially holy.

**Witherington:** Yes, and that has to be a community project, not an individual crusade.

**Crossan:** Was there anything else that you heard from what I said?

**Witherington:** I missed the best bits with the jokes.

**Crossan:** I would say this goes back to William Herzog's book *Parables as Subversive Speech*.<sup>13</sup> The appropriate term for that would be what I call collaborative discourse. Parables are a way of luring people into thinking for themselves and to collaborating in participatory actions. It's probably a mouthful to say it, but parables are participatory pedagogy. Don't try that from the pulpit. But I think it goes with thinking about why Jesus would speak in parables. It seems to me to be inevitability correct if he is really talking about collaborative eschatology.

**Witherington:** But the other thing that we are facing, Dom, is anti-intellectualism. Many in the church see the intellectualizing of the faith as spirit-killing in various ways. One of the things we have to overcome is the idea that you have to check your brain at the door to talk about or believe these things that we're talking about and believing in. And so one of the important purposes of this dialogue is to make clear that we need both sound and keen minds thinking about these things as well as more parties to embrace the truth. That's something we have to overcome. My grandmother's advice to me when

13. William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

I went off to seminary—she had no more than an eighth-grade education—was “Don’t be so open-minded that your brains fall out.” (*Laughter*)

**Crossan:** There’s a subtle difference between baptism and lobotomy, I suppose. (*Laughter*)

**Witherington:** All right then.

**Crossan:** I think we are probably done.

**Witherington:** We are done.

#### FRIDAY-NIGHT Q&A

**Amy-Jill Levine:** Dom, I don’t understand where justice fits into your eschatology. Where is justice for all the others, the others who were crucified but didn’t come back? Where is the justice for the mothers whose babies were killed by those soldiers? Do you envision some sort of sheep-and-goats model, or is justice simply the hope that Rome doesn’t win in the end?

And Ben, what exactly is your earthly ethics? You talked about various ways you worked with society. You talked about Jesus being radical, but I don’t see exactly what that looks like. If it is love of God and love of neighbor, we already got that in Leviticus. If it is Jesus giving his life as sacrifice, good—but how exactly does that transform Christian life in terms of things like family structures or a debt economy or land ownership? What does it look like on the ground?

So Dom, eschatological justice; Ben, earthly ethics.

**Crossan:** I am profoundly impressed by Eastern Christianity’s vision of the resurrection, which does not simply show Jesus coming out of the tomb *alone*, as we do in the Western tradition. I think that an individual resurrection of Jesus could be called, by any Jew in the first century, nepotism or filiotism—God taking care only of God’s own Messiah or Son. They would ask exactly this question: Jesus is not the first Jew, nor will he be the last Jew, to die on a Roman cross, so where is God’s justice for them? I think that the Jewish vision of communal or corporate resurrection is better preserved within the Eastern Christian tradition, where Jesus is coming out with all the just behind him—especially Adam and Eve, but also Abel, the first martyr of the Old Testament, and John the Baptist, the first martyr of the New Testament.

I cannot, by the way, take that vision literally. I wish it could be taken literally. But I think what it means is that when we finally talk about divine justice for the future, we have to have a cosmic peace-and-reconciliation commission for the past. That is how I would describe what I call the Eastern resurrection tradition, which is much closer, I think, to Judaism's vision of resurrection than our Western one. So yes, they will die; their names we will not know. But if we ever speak of justice for the future, we will have to admit injustice of the past. We can't expect God to be just for the future but not for the past.

**Witherington:** I would say I do believe in the justice that is coming in the future with the resurrection of the dead in the body when Jesus returns. And if justice is not done and seen to be done on the earth, then it is not done. And it will be done. So I just add that as a footnote.

To AJ's question to me, my answer would be, among other things, that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. What that means to me is that none of us are owners. We are all stewards. And what that means—this cuts equally well against communism and capitalism, frankly, or socialism, take your pick—is that God is the owner of it all. We didn't bring it with us. And even if you are buried with your pink Cadillac, you can't take it with you. The truth is that we are simply stewards of God's property. For me, that is profoundly important. That affects the way I do my budget, I spend my money, etc. And that is far more than a theology of tithing. It belongs to God, and we have to take that very seriously.

**Darrell Bock:** I want to put on the table two ideas to get into the conversation you all are having. And two elements are the Great Commandment and the New Covenant. And what the New Covenant gives us is forgiveness, which points to acceptance, and enablement, which points to the Spirit. So I want you to comment on this statement in putting this all together: Jesus goes for the heart to form a different kind of community that he calls "kingdom," that needs Spirit in order to function, that relates people to one another in love, which subsumes justice, in order to bring peace to the world. Or if I can say this with a Southern accent, y'all need to relate better to God so y'all can love each other better, and we will all have a better world, and God will be honored. So Spirit and Great Commandment.

**Crossan:** What I would say, Darrell, is that I would want to know and be clear on what Spirit I am dealing with.

**Bock:** The Holy Spirit.

**Crossan:** Holy Spirit, right. But what makes the Holy Spirit holy, as far as I am concerned, is that it is nonviolent. I don't want the spirit of a violent God. I really don't; I prefer not to have it. On the one hand, I do not think we can have justice on earth—because it is far too radical for us—without the Holy Spirit. But for me, that is the Spirit of the nonviolent God. I don't think it is holy if it is the Spirit of a violent God, because then we are back again with the standard imperial program of religion, war, victory, peace. The alternative for Rome's empire is God's kingdom, and its program is religion, nonviolence, justice, peace. But you still use the word *kingdom*. That is the word we can't get around.

Of course, Jesus says to love God and love your neighbor—I think, historically, yes, but let me put it this way: if you think of a human being as a body and soul, when they are separated, you get a corpse. You've separated justice and love. And I think justice is the flesh of love, and love is the spirit of justice. You can distinguish them, but I don't think you can separate them. So I always want to know what's the content of this love. I think the content of the love is justice, but I don't think you can get the one without the other. They strike me as two sides of the same coin. You can distinguish them, but if you split the coin, you don't get two coins, you get neither. So I want justice as the spirit of love.

**Witherington:** I just want to make a distinction here: Justice is when you get what you deserve. Mercy is when you don't get what you deserve. And grace is when you get what you don't deserve. Honestly, at the end of the day, even though there are lots of reasons to cry for justice, and there is a righteous anger that deserves to be heard—no question about that—there are several sides to justice. If it is true that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, then it's important that what the Bible says about God be recognized, which is “Justice is mine, I will repay. Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”

I think the need, Darrell, is to focus on the forgiveness side of this. I am so struck by the way it is presented in Matthew, when Peter says, “Lord, should I forgive my neighbors seven times when they sin against me?” And Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seven times seventy” (that's probably how the text reads). What is striking to me about that is that it is the reverse of what Genesis says Lamech said. Lamech said, “I am going to take vengeance seven times seventy.” Jesus is deliberately reversing the polarity and saying we are going to forgive that much. I think Jesus' followers, including Paul, got that. Paul says, “Love

keeps no record of wrongdoing.” However hard it may be, forgiveness is at the heart of this gospel, and that’s a game changer in itself.

**Stephen Patterson:** Dom and Ben, I would like to hear you both speak a bit about the social location of the historical Jesus. I am rather biblical in my view of his social location. That means I take him as a peasant who was a handworker, which in my estimation places him fairly low on the social food chain. It means that he has a fairly limited worldview. It means that he has no access to education. You kind of see where I am going with this.

Dom, how do you imagine Jesus as socially located in such a way that he can engage questions of empire? And at what level does he engage the whole question? He doesn’t have a Virgil’s understanding of the empire and how it works. He has never been to Rome. He doesn’t know what the senate is. He probably has very little understanding of the Roman army. What does he understand about the empire, given his social location?

And Ben, for you, the social location of Jesus will dictate what we can imagine him as able to do in terms of engaging the tradition. I think, perhaps, Matthew has Lamech in his head. I’m not sure Jesus does. So how do you imagine him with cultural resources where you could propose the kind of engagement with the tradition that you want to propose?

**Witherington:** I’ll start this time. I would disagree with you. I don’t think it is accurate or adequate to call Jesus a peasant. I certainly don’t think he was illiterate. I agree that he was a manual worker. *Tektōn* has various possible meanings. I would be very surprised if he was a highly impoverished one or that his family was, considering there was a boomtown being built right over the back hill from where he lived called Sepphoris. So I am not convinced by the illiterate-peasant model of Jesus. I think he was deeply steeped in the Scriptures. I think he could read the Hebrew text. I don’t think our modern class system helps us very much in analyzing this. There wasn’t an equivalent of a middle class in antiquity. There was basically the überwealthy, the 2 to 5 percent, and then there was everyone else. There was gradient scale all the way down to day labor and poverty.

I don’t think we are really helped by the analysis getting at Jesus’ social location. I am not like a prosperity preacher who teaches Jesus was wealthy. Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, and Jesus has nowhere to lay his head, he says while on the road. But at the same time, I don’t think the category of peasant helps us at all. And I don’t think it is historically accurate.

**Crossan:** We would disagree on that. I don't choose "peasant" to make any other point than that is what I think Jesus was. I found it horrifying that some people thought I was saying he was stupid. I thought we had learned that in Vietnam; those peasants weren't stupid. Let me take the Greek word *tektōn* (Mark 6:3), usually translated as "carpenter." When Mark uses it for Jesus' social location, I am very impressed by the fact that Matt. 13:35 changes Mark—and I think *changes* is the right word—to say that it is his father who is a *tektōn* but Luke 4:22 omits that term completely, for either father or son. When Matthew and Luke see something in Mark that embarrasses them—for example, when James and John want first places in the kingdom (Mark 10:35-37)—Matt. 20:20-21 says that it was their mother who requested it for them, and Luke leaves out the whole incident. Similarly, here, I think they are embarrassed by Mark calling Jesus a *tektōn*. A modern translation of *tektōn* that will give us some of its ancient connotation would be a laborer. I think *carpenter* doesn't help.

In one sense, I say that not to prove anything. I don't think that makes him stupid or any term like that. I think it is just the accurate word. In terms of how Jesus knows the Romans, I repeat that it is vitally important that at the time Jesus was born, around the death of Herod the Great, two Roman legions come south from Antioch in Syria to help a third Roman legion that got itself in trouble in Jerusalem. That's three Roman legions coming into the Jewish homeland. When they came, they came not just defensively but to teach rebels an imperial lesson: we won't come back for a couple of generations, and won't have to. They came in 4 bce, 66 ce, and 132 ce. Count the generations. There was a Roman legion in Jesus' backyard about the time he was born. Now, we know what happens to villages when the legions come through. They live off the land. Any male who is not hidden securely will be killed, any female raped, any child enslaved. Now, I hope—and there is some evidence—that many people in Galilee had hiding places.

I cannot imagine that, throughout the life of Jesus, the day the Romans came was not a major topic of maybe story, legend, and everything else in his village. And I do admit completely my biases in that, because that is the way the Irish handled it when the Dragoons came. I could be wrong, but I think it is a valid opinion. It was the biggest thing in their life. How could he not know all about the Romans? And how could he not wonder where God was that day?

**Witherington:** Just a footnote to that: I would say that the lexicographical evidence about *tektōn* ranges from a worker in stone to a carpenter. It's somebody who has a skilled trade. So I think the evidence is pretty clear about that; we're not talking about a day laborer. There's different language to be

used for that, whether we're talking about Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek. And that's not what Jesus is called, and so I think we're talking about something else. We're talking about either a carpenter or stoneworker.

**Q:** If Jesus was not only a man but also divine as he claims to be in the Gospels, how would that affect your matrix of the message of Jesus, which seems to paint Jesus as no more than a prophet who is reacting against his culture and circumstances which he cannot predict?

**Crossan:** That would not be my image. Jesus lives in a world where, whether we like it or not, it was possible for some human beings who had done some major, extraordinary, or transcendental service for the human race—and thereby manifested the character of divinity—to be considered divine. I repeat: certain human beings could be considered divine. A divine title was not given unless you had done something extraordinary for the human race or the local human race that was making the statement. Therefore, Caesar Augustus, having brought peace after twenty years of savage civil war, was considered divine. He was, of course, a human being. And the Romans were never imprudent enough to call a council at Nicaea to figure out how he could be both human and divine at the same time. They would have said, “We will not submit Roman imperial theology to Greek philosophy. We will explain it to the Greeks, if they have trouble understanding imperial divinity, with the legions.”

I have no problem whatsoever with saying Jesus was absolutely human and the claim that he was divine is first-century language saying this person has done something of extraordinary or transcendental importance for the human race and thereby manifested the very character of divinity itself. And when the language then is precisely point-counterpoint with the language of Roman imperial theology, they are saying that the extraordinary thing this person (Christ) has done is the opposite of what that person (Caesar) has done. That's the language of the first century, whether we like or not. We might not use that language; they did. That was their language to make the claim that this is an incarnation of something extraordinary and therefore revelatory of divinity itself.

**Q:** Both of you made statements along the lines of “the world belongs to God,” but the Genesis account is the world was stolen from God, almost like a kind of act of violence on the part of Adam and Eve—and Satan. It is interesting that the Jews chafed under the Roman Empire. The Messiah was supposed to overthrow the tyrannical powers of this world and establish a kingdom of peace

and justice and righteousness. And Jesus obviously had the power. He told Peter he had twelve legions of angels at his disposal; that's a lot of killing power. I don't know if I agree with both of you on this, I don't know if you have a proper perspective on God's violence. Physical death is an act of violence; everybody in the room is under the violence of God, the curse of death. The kingdom itself in Revelation is ushered in through an act of violence. The Battle of Armageddon is a violent overthrow of Satan and the Antichrist. You have to resist an evil kingdom with violence. Christ does. I think there is something missing here. Obviously there is a kingdom of justice and peace, yet Peter was on to something, but it wasn't that.

**Witherington:** First of all, there is no Battle of Armageddon in the book of Revelation. Jesus simply says, "You are toast," fire falls from heaven, it's over. Secondly, there is nobody worthy to open up a can of you-know-what on the world in the book of Revelation but Jesus. The book of Revelation is the most antimilitaristic book in the whole New Testament, because only the Lamb is worthy to judge the world. And furthermore, the three sets of seven judgments that come down in the book of Revelation are not intended to be punitive or final. They are intended to be disciplinary so that repentance will come. That is why there is a gap between the sixth and seventh one, for God to hear the prayers. So if you look at the book of Revelation carefully, it does say "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." "You keep your hands off the guns and the throttle, thank you very much, human beings." It's a book that says that God is sovereign, and justice is in God's hands, and in the end, God will resolve these matters. That's what the book of Revelation says.

**Crossan:** And we would disagree on this one. Because what I see through the entire Bible, the entire Bible, is two streams of tradition: a stream in which God is violent and the final solution of divine violence is that God will destroy the evildoers; and also a stream of a nonviolent God of distributive justice. They are both there through the entire Bible.

The criterion for the Bible for me is the historical Jesus, also known, theologically, as the incarnation of God. Which God do I see in Jesus? I can't find the violent God in Jesus. I see Christianity working zealously to get a violent God back into Jesus. But I don't find such a God revealed in Jesus. Pilate got that one right. The violent God is not in Jesus. So as far as I am concerned, Jesus is the norm for the Christian Bible. That is why God so loved the world he didn't send us a book; he sent us a person. We are not the people of the book; we are the people of the person. "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) is the question,

not “What does the Bible say?” (WDBS). [AQ: OK?] So I would insist that Jesus is the norm of the Bible, including the violent God of Revelation.

And I find that God has a monopoly on violence in Revelation. I agree with you that we are not supposed to be violent. I think the *Left Behind* novels are wrong to think that God is violent and have humans join in God’s final apocalyptic violence. I find the idea of a violent God far more terrifying, because then we humans have a mandate for violence. Why not?

**Witherington:** So we are in agreement that the *Left Behind* series should be left behind? [Audience laughter]

**Crossan:** Yes. But they could have never gotten divine violence out of the Sermon on the Mount, but they could out of the book of Revelation.

**Witherington:** This is why I’ve been writing novels to replace them.

**Crossan:** Good luck!

**Q:** Dr. Crossan, I have a question for you. Would you say that Jesus dying on the cross was a result of the success of his message or the failure of his message? What is your view of the cross? What did Jesus actually accomplish on the cross, in your opinion?

**Crossan:** Is it a result of his message? Yes, yes. Everything I see Jesus doing his last week in Jerusalem is trying *not* to get himself killed. He leaves the city every night and goes to Bethany. That makes sense. The crowd is on his side, as Mark says, day after day after day. The crowd is on his side. So he is not trying to get himself killed—which, by the way, was very easy to do in the first century. You didn’t have to work very hard to get yourself killed. Just knock on Pilate’s door and call him a name or something.

What the cross did was show that a life of nonviolence, even when confronted with the ultimate violence of execution, is possible. It’s possible to live a life of nonviolence, even unto death, even death on a cross. And what the resurrection means for me is that Jesus was executed by Rome, vindicated by God, and therefore God and Rome are on a collision course again.

**Witherington:** For me, I think Mark 10:45 has it absolutely right: Jesus says, “I didn’t come to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom for the many.” We see this also in the Pastoral Epistles, almost the same identical

kind of saying. It seems to me that Jesus died not just because of his message or who he claimed to be; there was a purpose in his death that he intended.

Now, there is plenty of evidence from earlier Maccabean literature that martyriological deaths could be used positively when you gave your life for somebody. In some of the literature, it is even said to atone for sin. So it was not like this idea was foreign to early Judaism. It existed before the time of Jesus. I certainly think Jesus saw himself in that way. I think he exegeted himself out of something like Isaiah 53, as well as Daniel 7. The problem, the human dilemma, was a sin problem that had both spiritual and social dimensions to it, and he believed he was giving his life to deal with that problem.

**Q:** What limitations do you both see on historiographical conventions putting on historical reconstruction with the Gospels being Greco-Roman biography or Luke-Acts being historical monograph? How much can we discern between Jesus' own social location and say of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John's audience(s), etc.?

**Crossan:** I actually think a huge amount. My method is, first, to bracket as best I can everything in the gospel texts and try to write my thickest description of Antipas's Galilee and what Antipas wanted to do there in the 20s. My point is not to take material out of the gospel at the start. What is the thickest description of the Galilean 20s that can be reconstructed with the help of archeology, anthropology, sociology, or history, or anything I can find? It's as if I were making a film about Antipas.

Then, secondly, I want to see what really fits in there from those initially bracketed gospel texts. And, of course, the thing that comes out again and again is the kingdom. It's in the Lord's Prayer. So immediately that puts me back with this: Antipas is busy building the kingdom of Rome in Galilee, and Jesus is building an alternative kingdom of God in that same Galilee. So I think I now have, just by history alone, some idea of what Antipas and Jesus are about.

That is just about all you can do. I think there is more than enough data there. You can add layers onto that if you want to get into an argument about whether Jesus is illiterate or whether Jesus can read the Scriptures. Those actually are not going to change Jesus much for me. I am not convinced Jesus was literate. But I am convinced that sometimes an ability to *read* the Scriptures may confuse you about the simplicity of its major challenge: who owns the world? You may get so involved in exegesis or something that you miss the obvious meaning of the Scriptures. So I think the data that we have gives us a good glimpse of what Jesus was like and why a Roman governor would decide

to execute him (because he was a revolutionary) but not round up his followers (because he was nonviolent). I think we can make sense out of that.

**Witherington:** I would just say that written history, at its very best, is only a tiny subset of what actually happened. And if we are looking at the difference between Jesus in his historical milieu and the gospel writers writing—I would say between 38 ce up to the end of the first century, later than the death of Jesus—then of course the social context, the social provenance are different. I happen to think that the Gospel of Matthew was written to Jewish Christians, possibly in Antioch or even in Capernaum. So that may be the closest social matrix written to a people of a particular audience that is close to Jesus'. But even so, time has moved on. Matthew is probably writing after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. So yes, we have to distinguish the social context in which the gospels were written from the social context of Jesus, and they are certainly different.

What is interesting to me about that is that even if Mark's Gospel was written in Rome largely for Gentile Christians, if we take that view for a moment, nonetheless, he still faithfully reports all sorts of Jewish disagreements and arguments about corban, and about Sabbath, about plucking grain, and about clean and unclean—arguments that may have not been relevant to the daily life of Gentile Christians in Rome in particular. So what that says to me is that these people cared about history. They wanted to know who the historical Jesus actually was, and they wanted to be faithful to this Jesus tradition that had been passed down to them. And thankfully, we then have evidence that will help us not only understand something about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but also about Jesus himself. Thank you very much.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND FINAL Q&A

**Crossan:** Just to talk about something that we touched on a couple of times, and that's about presuppositions when you handle miracles. Objections tell me that I just don't believe in miracles, or I don't believe in the supernatural. Actually, I don't believe in the supernatural because to believe in the supernatural, you have to believe in the natural. And as soon as you believe in the natural, you've already lost to the post-Enlightenment experience. I don't believe in a world in which it is all natural but periodically there are divine interventions that we call the supernatural. That's not the way I accept it. The major issue for me is this: It's not that I live in a post-Enlightenment world, though I certainly do, and I do hope for a divine consistency that will keep the aerodynamics of Continental

the same tomorrow as when I flew here Wednesday. I really do. And we have to admit that. I trust physics to a certain extent, and I trust divine consistency even more.

But my point is this: I'm reading in a pre-Enlightenment world, where I do understand that everyone in this world takes it for granted that wonderful things—let me use that term instead of miraculous things—wonderful things can happen. They really do. So in that world, no one can really say to the other, “This is unique!” And nobody can say back, “This is impossible!” For example, if in this world, it shows on the coins—the silver denarii minted by Augustus for his adopted father—that Julius Caesar has ascended into heaven, I take it for granted that most people accepted that. I have no idea whether people took it literally or metaphorically, and neither does anyone else. We know that they took it functionally, they took it pragmatically, and they took seriously—and it would have been very unwise to suggest to Augustus, “You do know this is just a metaphor.” I wouldn't advise that at all. When Paul said that Jesus has ascended into heaven (and I know the difference about his body, and I am not getting into that here), in a pre-Enlightenment world, nobody can say, “Paul, that's not possible!” They can't say that. They might say, “I don't believe your story, Paul.” But they cannot say it's impossible. And neither really can Paul say it is unique. And they don't. What they really say is, “If Julius Caesar is up in heaven, what's he doing for us?” And the answer is, “He is taking very good care of the Roman Empire and his adopted son down here, Augustus, and that's why things are going so well.” OK, if I accept that, the polite pre-Enlightenment answer about the miracles, the resurrection, and everything about Jesus is, to quote Amy-Jill, “So what?” It's not a polite pre-Enlightenment answer to tell Paul, “I just don't believe your story.” To do so would be tacky. You might say, “OK, so what?” Which means, “What's Jesus going to do for me?”

So in the pre-Enlightenment world, as I look at these miracles, I have to do with integrity one of two things. I can either say I accept them all. I accept the Roman ones, I accept the Jewish ones, I accept the Christian ones, I accept them all. And then I can ask, “So what did they mean?” I can take them all literally. Or I can take them all metaphorically. But it seems to me to lack historical integrity, to say of the Roman data, “We just don't believe that. It's mythical,” but when we come to the Christian data to say, “That's fact.” I think that lacks historical credibility. You either take the miraculous conception of Caesar Augustus literally, and then you take Jesus' literally. If you take this metaphorically, then you take that metaphorically. And either way, they are in confrontation with one another. Metaphors can fight one another just as well as facts.

So what I am trying to do is understand a pre-Enlightenment world that takes wonderful or miraculous things as possible and understand them. And the proof of this is that when I read Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century, he never argues that this stuff, the pagan stories, couldn't happen. He might argue that it's just the devil at work, but that's still happening. So he can write that when we Christians say that Jesus is ascended into heaven, we say nothing different than what you claim for your emperors. Now, of course, he is going to claim we *do* say something different, because our Jesus is worth more than all your emperors rolled up into a ball, which will get him killed eventually. And when Celsus argues back against that, he cannot say and does not say, "Your stuff is impossible." He just says, "Your Jesus has never done anything worthwhile for the human race." So our arguments for impossibility and uniqueness are post-Enlightenment arguments and equally invalid on both sides. If you want to understand the way I approach, if you want to, what I ask for is either take all of these miracles literally and recognize they are still adversarial, or take them all metaphorically and they're still adversarial. But we shouldn't spend our time arguing that their stuff didn't happen and our stuff did. I think that lacks historical integrity.

**Witherington:** Now is the time for summing up . . .

**Crossan:** Yes, it is.

**Witherington:** The question it raises for me is, why does Plutarch say, "Nowadays, people don't really believe that the gods are gods?"

**Crossan:** I take it for granted that very, very intelligent and sophisticated philosophers may not have believed a lot of this stuff. But I would still say that you would not tell Caesar Augustus, "You are divine, your imperial highness, but that's just a metaphor." I would not advise that, and Livy doesn't do it.

**Witherington:** OK. What we have tried to do in this time that we've had together since yesterday may seem to some of you like an exercise in futility, like arguing over the number of angels on the head of a pin. But I would like to suggest to you that it's not that at all. First of all, the importance of this is that we are having a discourse and a dialogue, not a debate. We are having a conversation among people who disagree on various things. So this is not an exercise in futility; it's an exercise in fertility, in cross-fertilization, an attempt to

mutually understand even when we have to agree to disagree. So there is great importance in all of this.

Secondly, in an age that is, in my view, increasingly postmodern and gnostic, the very fact that you have people taking with deadly earnest the concept of the historical Jesus and what he said and what he did is refreshing and not very much like what is out there in our culture. But it matters greatly for Christianity and for Judaism, because Judaism and Christianity, and for that matter Islam, are historical religions, religions for whom history matters. It's not just a substratum that matters, but the very essence of what is being claimed about some of these religions is indeed historical. So why we are having this discussion about what the historical Jesus said, what he meant, and what his message was—you need to understand that theology is not something over here, and history over here. What we have in the gospels, when we study Jesus, is theological history if you want to put it that way, or historical theology if you want to put it that way. But either way, they are intermeshed one with another. It's important for all of us to help each other to be enlightened about what the real significance of Jesus is and not simply presume that we know. Why is this important? In a Jesus-haunted culture that is biblically illiterate, anything can pass for knowledge of the historical Jesus. And that is a very dangerous place for our culture to be.

I want to give one illustration, and then I will quit. A long time ago, in 1969, I was riding in the mountains in North Carolina on the Blue Ridge Parkway with a friend in my father's old 1955 Chevrolet. Now, if you know anything about the Blue Ridge Parkway, you know there are no gas stations, there are no signs, there is a forty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit, it's like the Natchez Trace. And my clutch blew out, and as the Bible says, my countenance fell. (*Crossan chuckles.*) And we had to have the car pushed off the Blue Ridge Parkway, down an exit ramp, and to a Texaco station. It was 1969, Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon, all kinds of things seemed to be possible. So my friend and I, my high school friend Doug Harris, decided to hitchhike back to Highpoint, and we were immediately picked up by a really ancient-of-days kind of couple driving a 1948 Plymouth. They were both dressed in black, and they were deadly earnest, but they told us to get in the back of the car. We did.

The first thing that happened after we only got two miles down the road was that my friend Doug, who is a lawyer now, said, "So what did you think about Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon?" And the driver said, "That's all fake. That's a Hollywood stunt on TV. Never happened." Doug, not recognizing invincible ignorance when he saw it (*Crossan chuckling*), wanted

to argue. He said, “What are you talking about? Of course he landed on the moon. Didn’t you see those fabulous pictures of the world twirling in space, the beautiful round orb?” And then the man got really angry and said, “The world ain’t round either.” Doug kept pressing the matter. I kept saying (*whispers*), “Shut up, Doug! We need this ride.” Doug said, “What makes you think the world’s not round?” “It says in the book of Revelations,” says the man (beware of anyone who begins a sentence, “It says in the Book of Revelations”—that’s not the name of that book), “It says in the book of Revelations that the angels will stand at the four corners of the earth. Can’t be round if it has four corners, now, can it, Mister?” Doug wasn’t finished. “What do you mean it’s not round and doesn’t revolve?” The man said, “Course it doesn’t revolve. You ever walked out at night into your front yard and found yourself standing upside down? I think not.”

Now, what was this man’s problem with the book of Revelation? It wasn’t that he took it seriously. It was that he took figurative language, theological language, as if it were cosmological language describing the shape of the earth. The metaphor meant that the angels would come from all points of the compass to gather the elect. That’s what it meant. But he assumed it was teaching him cosmology and he needed to hold on to that for dear life. He was a flatlander. Yes, in 1969, back in the dawn of time when the earth was still cooling, there were still flatlanders in North Carolina.

Now here is my point: The truth of the matter is that faith should be seeking understanding—*fides quaerens intellectum*. History, real history, is not a threat to real faith. Real history will help us understand our faith. And if our posture toward the study of the message of Jesus, which we have looked at during this time, becomes faith seeking understanding, then we will want to hear as many bright minds as we can and tease our own minds into active thought, so that together we will better understand the message of Jesus. Thank you very much.

#### Q&A

**Q:** I have a singular curiosity I’ve tried to ask in three different ways, and I am also using the language of *matrix* because it seems to be the smart thing to do, not because I am directing the question at anybody. Are matrix and messiah mutually exclusive? Are the message of Jesus and man Jesus defined by the matrix, or is the matrix the context by which we best understand his message? Could any mere man with the right characteristics intersecting the same matrix at the same time generate the same impact as Jesus did on the world? And does

that imply that if we wait long enough, we should expect something similar to happen again?

**Crossan:** I am too old to remember five questions. Let me be clear on the reason I use the word *matrix*: it is to insist on the interaction of background-foreground, context-text. I also like it because it comes from the root *mater*, the word for mother. That's a bonus. It's not a major reason, but it's a major bonus.

When I put that thing up in the video, I put up four points. The crosshairs of the matrix for me are the tradition, which is the context in which you grow up and everyone tells you this is the way that it is, and vision, which is the simply the paradigm shift, as one person or group swerves the tradition. But there are also and always time and place. Time and place are not negotiable in the matrix. You can't say, "Well, couldn't somebody else have said what Jesus said?" or, "Didn't Amos almost say exactly the same thing as Jesus said?" That's why my window of opportunity was there as well. And you only know a window of opportunity, sometimes, when you hear the sound of it closing.

Precisely in the Roman Empire, and precisely in the lull in the Jewish homeland between two great insurrections, there was a window of opportunity. That does not explain Jesus as if a window of opportunity could create you. It doesn't. But you can understand why in that window of opportunity, something happened. Really fast, think of Jesus in the year 20 ce. Go back about fifty years. That's about 30 bc. Herod is taking over his kingdom; I'd give Jesus ten minutes. Fifty years later, 70 ce, the Roman revenge is in full play; I'd give Jesus five minutes. Time and place could not be taken out.

It's like saying you could write a Mozart symphony. Yeah, but now you'd be copying, not creating. Basically, the matrix is destiny. You can call it providence. I have no problem with that. But in this time span, something can happen. And this applies to Paul just as well. In this time span, something happens. But without the time span, it would not happen.

**Q:** Dr. Crossan, thank you so very much for your time. In light of your view of Jesus being nonviolent, I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on his cleansing of the temple. He fashioned a whip and drove them out. Please, this is not a challenge. I want to know what you think.

**Crossan:** A lot of speakers have touched on this. First of all, it really isn't a cleansing. What is important for me is that it is a symbolic destruction of the temple for the reason that Jesus quotes, namely Jeremiah 7. Jeremiah is told by

God that if people use the temple, that is worship, as a refuge from justice—it’s a constant refrain of the prophets—God will destroy the temple. But you can’t say that, and Jeremiah is almost put to death for it (Jeremiah 26). I understand what Jesus does as a symbolic destruction of the temple following and quoting Jeremiah 7. The whip that you mentioned is only in John, and it is only in John because it’s only in John that the animals are driven out.

It’s not a cleansing of the temple. There is nothing I can see that needs cleansing in the outer courts of the temple, but turning over the money changers closes down the fiscal basis of the temple. It’s a demonstration. And if you think that is a twentieth-century word put back into the first, I can’t do anything about it. There were demonstrations. Pharisees and their students went up and took the golden eagle off the temple, and it cost them their lives as martyrs. That’s a demonstration. They didn’t storm the temple with swords. The demonstration cost them their lives. And that’s what Jesus was doing. That was a demonstration. Demonstrations are on the dangerous cusp where they are not just talking and they are not just violence, but they are very dangerous. Demonstrations always are very dangerous. They can turn violent with or without your control. So I don’t find anything violent in my sense in there.

**Witherington:** I would agree with Dom about that. There seems to be a difference between the use of force and violence. If I have to, which I do, over in the apartments push hard on my door to get it open because it sticks because of the humidity, that’s a use of force. But I don’t think I did any violence to the door. I could use the movie disclaimer. No animals were harmed in the production of this cleansing of the temple.

What I do think about that scene, which is very interesting, is that it appears to have been a recent practice to sell animals and do the money changing in the Court of the Gentiles. This was a new activity sponsored, I suppose, by Caiaphas and Ananias during the time of Jesus. Jesus is not taking umbrage with something that has been going on forever and ever. He may be taking umbrage to something that was a fairly recent practice. And he thought it was not appropriate in that particular venue, so I think I basically agree with Dom about that.

**Crossan:** Let me insist on Jeremiah 7, because that is quoted there, about “the den of thieves.” A den of thieves is not where thieves do their thieving. There is no anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism here; there’s no hint that somehow the money changers are thieving. That’s not the meaning of Jeremiah’s quote. The meaning of the Jeremiah quote is that you do your thieving out there, and

you get back to your safe house. It's part of the standard prophetic warning: do not use worship as a refuge from justice.

**Witherington:** Right.

**Q:** My question has to do with something you brought up, Dr. Crossan. But I'd appreciate if both of you addressed it. You had mentioned something about miracles recently, that if you believed in miracles, you'd have to be open to believing in all Greco-Roman miracles and birth stories if you also believed in the New Testament miracles. I disagree with that. I think there is a methodology that we could use that would help us to get a better understanding of when to accept a miracle. I don't have to be vulnerable just because I believe in miracles that anything anyone ever claims would have to be a miracle. I think that there are two things in my research that have been helpful. First of all, is the miracle significantly different from other classifications of miracles that I wouldn't accept? And second of all, is it not what I would expect? For example, take the virginal conception: the virginal conception is different from, say, the miracle story of Augustus's birth with Apollo and his mother being impregnated through that. For example, what we find in Matthew involves a spirit, it is nonphysical, and it's with a virgin. Those three aspects are not found in the ancient literature, at least in my research. Second, it is a very Jewish story. It's not a story that Jews have particularly been interested in, because the closest thing . . .

**Stewart:** Do you have a question?

**Q (continued):** Yes. In other words, *1 Enoch* is all about Genesis 6 and angels coming in, and that's the explanation for evil in the world in *1 Enoch*. It's not a Jewish story that they would be attracted to, so what methodology should you use for determining the veracity of a miracle?

**Crossan:** What I understand that Matthew and Luke, with possibly others before them, meant by a virginal conception is this. In the Greco-Roman tradition of a human being predestined for greatness (you are quite right), there was intercourse between a god and a human being. And in the traditional Jewish story about the predestined child of extraordinary future, there was intercourse, but between aged and infertile parents—that, by the way, would be a greater miracle than virginal conception, because it would be certain—if two ninety-year-olds produce a child, that's checkable—that is a miracle. Virginal

conceptions are very dangerous. You have to take somebody's word for it. I think what Christianity tried to do was, by using the virginal conception, to say this child is extraordinary against *both* the Greco-Roman matrix *and* the Jewish matrix of his own time. It's a claim for a unique type of conception. I think you are quite right.

Does that make it therefore anything more than a claim about the extraordinary future of Jesus or, to retroject it, of his extraordinary past? I don't think you get a methodology to say this one really happened because it is different from all the others. I don't think that gets you there.

**Witherington:** As to critical discernment in regard to miracles, I do think there are criteria by which you can evaluate miracles ancient or modern, and they should be applied. On this one, I don't agree with Dom that just because we accept that there are miracles in the gospels, ergo we must accept that these other stories are also miracles. Now, what we can say is that there are claims about miracles in both of these sources, and that they both have to be evaluated critically to see whether we think the claims are valid or not. So that's one thing.

I am not even going to begin to say that there were no miracles that happened outside the ministry of Jesus, because, of course, even in the book of Acts, we hear of others doing miracles, and it wouldn't surprise me if there weren't miracles outside of the biblical tradition as well. So they all have to be critically evaluated.

In regard to the virginal conception, in particular, I don't think this can be called an example of prophecy historicized. Because, frankly, I don't think that Isa. 7:14 predicts—or was understood to predict in early Judaism—exactly what happened in the life of Mary. Now, what seems to be the case is that something unexpected and unusual happened in the life of Mary and Jesus' family, and then the early Christians said, "It has to be in the Old Testament somewhere; we need to find a text that helps us understand this." So what happened was that the history in the life of Mary forced a reevaluation of a prophecy like Isa. 7:14. It's not that the story was created to fit a preexisting notion of a virginal conception, because the Hebrew of Isa. 7:14 does not need to read that way at all. It's just a young woman of marriageable age conceives and gives birth to a child that is going to be a king. That's a whole different ball game. That's what I would want to say about that.

But the crucial thing is critical analysis of stories and whether there are criteria to apply to whether this could be a genuine miracle or not—whether it is in or outside the biblical tradition.

**Stewart:** Unfortunately, our time is up. Thank you to all of you who came to hear our speakers discuss the message of Jesus. Thanks especially to all of our speakers for presenting stimulating papers. Thanks especially to Dom and Ben for their warm spirit and enlightening dialogue. God bless you all.