

Finding Faith in Fact and Fiction: Making Sense of the New Testament while Maintaining our Integrity and the Integrity of the Text¹

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1. Demystifying the New Testament

The New Testament is a collection of early Christian writings associated with key figures in the early decades of the movement. Let's read it. It's as simple as that. And like unknowing adventurers entering the surf at a notorious swimming spot we are confident of swimming from A to B, not realising that this is a place where there are underwater currents and rips. People have drowned here. It is far from a body of placid waters. Such undercurrents and rips make reading the New Testament a place of tragedy and death, not just of exhilaration and inspiration. People have died for it, discriminated on the basis of it, perpetuated unaddressed values through it, as well as finding in it a timelessness far beyond what they might find in other writings from that or any other period. Such swirling turbulence has made it extraordinarily difficult to approach the New Testament as a collection of early Christian writings and yet that is what they are, whatever else they have become. It is possible to swim between the flags and I invite you to join me.

Calling the New Testament a collection already recognises that it is not a single book with a single author, divine or human, but an assemblage of smaller collections of works which each had its distinctive setting. This is most clearly the case with letters attributed to Paul, either because they were authentically his or because those who acclaimed his authority wrote in his name. His own letters were addressed to particular situations in the 50s, some 20 or so years after Jesus' death, usually to tackle particular issues, pastoral and practical. In many cases these are very clear. Paul wrote because he was too far away to drop in and speak directly. He tells us this. It would have been far from his mind that his letters might be gathered to become an inspiration for two millennia of Christians. Later writings attributed to Paul or to others like Peter, James, and Jude, appear to use these pseudonyms to address wider church groups on broader issues, some being little more than circulated sermons.

A broader audience of local churches is also to be assumed for the gospels whose authors may well have envisaged long term use.² At their core they give an account of Jesus' ministry and death, but it is also obvious that the selection of material which they make, the sequence in which they put it, and the emphasis given, all reflect particular concerns. Along the spectrum of degrees of probability which must characterise all historical reconstruction some concerns are clearer than others. The gospel attributed to Matthew seems to reflect a largely Jewish setting where mainly Jewish Christians have competed unsuccessfully for synagogue leadership and find

¹ An earlier version of a paper was delivered to the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, November 2007.

² Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 9-48, argues this in his work. It need not, however, imply that the gospel writers were unaffected by local issues and did not seek to address them. See the critical discussion in David Sim, "The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham," *JSNT* 84 (2002) 3-27.

themselves alienated. John's gospel is not so different in setting but very different in its response, reflecting a highly imaginative and creative account in which Jesus' engagement in dialogue has him speaking the language of Christian faith rather than that of the Galilean Jew. Luke is different again, concerned with unity and continuity with Israel and across the Jewish and non-Jewish churches of his day, and adding a second volume to his work, which brings together old traditions from the church's formative years within an idealising framework. Mark is seen by most for good reason as the earliest, reflecting values of non-Jewish Christianity of a kind that traced its origins to Paul's mission, and writing around 70, some 10 to 15 years before Matthew and Luke, who made his work the basis for their own.

The gospels have a much more complex history. Originally anonymous, they received their attributions of authorship, "according to", in the second century, most likely at a time when competing gospels of dubious value were emerging, such as those of Judas and Mary Magdalene which claimed that Jesus' real secret was that he told us how to escape the material world. The attributions have more to do with preserving the priority of these writings as more ancient than they have to do with history, though some still argue that Mark was too insignificant a name to be a fiction at this point and that others may have been known to have had associations with the beginnings of those communities in which each gospel emerged.³

The complexity relates in particular to their sources and the claim that they actually tell us something about the historical Jesus. The most convincing explanation of sources which for good reason still holds its own among the majority of specialists in the field is that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of one another using Mark as their primary source, but also shared a body of written material commonly identified by the German word for "source", "Quelle", abbreviated as Q. From this source derive the beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and many of the parables and sayings common to both. They also had independent sources. Thank you, Luke, for giving us the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son! Mark, too, will have had sources and all will have known some oral traditions.

What does all this complexity mean? It means that the end product of the gospels has been through a complex process. Seeing the both creative and conservative ways in which Matthew and Luke rework Mark gives us some clues about the nature of that process. Some of the creativity reflects that the authors had learned the basic skills of rhetoric well, which were core curriculum for the educated and essential if you were writing for something to be read aloud to an audience. It accounts for clever contrasts such as following episodes which show the disciples failing to see Jesus' point with others which depict Jesus making the blind to see (Mark 8:14-21, 22-26). It is fairly obvious that people collected anecdotes with similar motifs, like parables about grain (e.g., Mark 4:1-34), or with similar themes, like stories of Jesus' witty responses to

³ See the recent defence of traditional attributions, based in particular on Papias, in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitness: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). His primary concern is to counter the myth of a decades long uncontrolled anonymous oral tradition such as he sees assumed by the form critics and their successors which then implies high levels of incredibility in relation to the sayings and anecdotes about Jesus. His work is a salutary challenge to that skepticism, though its own speculations are not adequately controlled. These include the notion of the twelve acting as guardians of the tradition, that named persons indicated individual guarantors of traditions, that traditions were scarcely shaped by contexts of their use, and that Peter's name at either end of Mark's gospel was a conventional clue to his being the source of its information.

criticism (Mark 2:1 – 3:6). No one appears to have had a timeline of Jesus' ministry beyond that the baptism occurred at the beginning and the death at the end, so this gave the authors freedom to reorder material for greater rhetorical and theological effect. The processes of oral communication and story-telling will have been similarly creative and conservative. It is fairly obvious that in some circles miracles were a major tool in propaganda for Jesus, a strategy from which others later resiled significantly (John 2:23-25; 3:1-5 Matt 7:21-23; 1 Cor 13:1-3), but also that they and other anecdotes were soon being retold in ways that deliberately reflected Old Testament stories, the latter contributing embellishments and sometimes newly created stories. This was true already in the story of Jesus' death where Psalm 22 has inspired some of the detail.

Finding the historical Jesus in all this is not as simple as swimming from A to B. The core material relates to less than a year in Jesus' life, perhaps two more if John's chronology is right.⁴ Even then it is a selection and one that has undergone processes of oral and literary creativity, so much so that some hold up their hands in despair of ever really knowing anything about the historical Jesus. I am much less pessimistic, but respectful that reconstruction cannot help but be a mix of the likely and the less likely. It matters as long as Christian faith thinks Jesus was and is central. Mostly we must be satisfied to live with a construct of artistic licence and believe that the portraits preserve sufficient of a semblance of Jesus and ultimately God to make it worthwhile to keep telling the story.

Such is our New Testament about which the low church simply declares, "God's Word", and the high, "The Word of the Lord", both of which reflect faith's defiance of the complexity. You don't have to be an art historian to stand before a great artwork in awe and for many that is more than enough to inspire. It is more difficult when you are told that what you see corresponds to other realities and extends its repertoire beyond evocation to authoritative announcement. Then the old protestant affirmation that every man woman and their dog can read the Bible needs radical qualification. Ultimately it reflects a failure to take the text with the seriousness which all ancient texts and all human communications deserve. Demystifying the New Testament is an essential element in taking it seriously.

2. Respecting Otherness

Let us push out into some deeper waters. Engaging the New Testament is engaging in cross-cultural encounter. In any human relationship respecting the otherness of the other, hallowing them, to borrow the language of the Lord's Prayer, is an essential component of communication and ultimately of intimacy. The New Testament writers and their traditions inhabit a first century world viewed from a particular Jewish perspective as inhabited by demons let loose until a final divine round up, as the arena of occasional divine interventions, including the miraculous and as finite in time and space. Understandings of space assumed a flat earth. Understandings of time assumed in most instances the expectation of a coming divine intervention to end the present

⁴ Michael Daise, *Feasts in John: Jewish Festivities and the Jesus Hour in the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2.229; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) argues that two of the Passovers in John refer to the primary and secondary celebration for those who missed the first and so should not be used to argue for two years.

age, redress its inequities through judgment and begin a new one. They wrote in Greek, most, heavily influenced by Greek semitic thought and language mediated by the synagogues and the Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures, as they passed on tradition reaching back to a Jesus of Galilee who spoke largely Aramaic. So far as we can discern, his Galilee was conservative Jewish (stone jars for purity, immersion pools, and no pig bones), poor, but not destitute, networked with the Jerusalem temple, but distant,⁵ and probably characterised by the seemingly eternal and eternally warranted sense that people at the centre “don’t really understand us”.

Much more could be said as we paddle through such issues. It means that we need always to proceed with caution and try to be aware of our own cultural assumptions. Dialogue with the readings of those who approach the gap from a different direction usually shines light on aspects we do not see. My reading as a white middle aged reasonably well-off heterosexual Australian male needs the readings of the wider community of readers: the poor of the developing world, women, gay people, and indigenous people, all of us fallible and able to lose our balance in the swell. We need to let the New Testament be strange because it is strange. It is interesting that sometimes you can see things sharply only when you hold them at a distance.

When we try to discern what those writers were saying in their contexts – I deliberately say “try” because so much colours our seeing – we find considerable diversity, which then helps us refine what we think is common. Let me restrict my observations to a few key themes.

Paul tells us that he received a tradition according to which Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:1-5). Already by the time he writes we can see that this tradition had spawned a range of images, some of them cultic (sacrifices made things happen), some of them drawn from non-cultic aspects of society, such as releasing slaves by paying ransoms. None lends itself well to be more than an image, such as to be the grid for working out a systematic understanding of Christ’s death, though many have tried. To take the image of redemption or liberation of slaves, who paid the ransom? Jesus or God? To whom was it paid: God? or the devil? Most would have been aware that such language had been employed to depict Israel’s liberation from Egypt without any such attempts to systematise the image. The cultic images were similar. Everyone just knew that sacrifices made things happen. Few contemplated how. So Paul’s statements are predictably untidy with the imagery’s loose ends, but later generations would debate whether Jesus was appeasing an angry god or performing an act of cleansing or expiation, or, using legal imagery, paying a fine or copping the penalty of others. At worst such systematising has created theories according to which God as a father has his son volunteer to suffer a violent death as a punishment to free God to forgive the sins of others and do so with the books balanced and all prices paid, a caricature of Paul’s understanding but said and sung enthusiastically to the present day.

⁵ See the recent review of recent research on the significance of archaeological work in Galilee for reconstructing its Judaism see Sean Freyne, “Archaeology and the Historical Jesus,” in *Jesus and Archaeology* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 64-83. See also Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2002) 43-52; Sean Freyne, *Jesus A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); and James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making Vol 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 293-302.

More seriously, by focussing primarily on Jesus' death – perhaps because he knew little of his life – Paul gives the impression that the decisive event which Christianity must proclaim as good news for the world which can change it, including bringing forgiveness, was Jesus' death. One might see this as shorthand on Paul's part for Jesus' life culminating in his death, but it can have the effect of marginalising the ministry of Jesus in ways that probably Paul would not have intended. It can also leave the impression that forgiveness of sins cannot have been an aspect of faith before Jesus' death. The latter would be a serious misconception. According to Mark Jesus declares God's forgiveness of sins already during his ministry; indeed, so does John the Baptist - for all! (1:4; 2:9). Forgiveness was fundamental to Judaism then and now. Faith fed on the psalms knows that well (e.g., Psalm 51).

So we have a line of tradition focussing on the event of Jesus' death and relating it to forgiveness of sins, especially in Paul's writings, but other traditions which see the decisive encounter with God taking place also earlier in Jesus' ministry. This is also true of John's gospel where to respond positively to Jesus during his ministry is to see the light, feed on the true bread, find life and water, and ultimately to find God.⁶ John seems to be aware of the depiction of the cross as Christ's death "for us", but he sees it primarily as the climax of a ministry of self-giving where at the finish ("it is finished") things come to a head and we see simultaneously how far love goes and how far hate goes. For Mark, Matthew, and Luke, including his depiction of the church's early preaching, Christ's death as a sacrifice for sins is not depicted as the decisive event.⁷ This probably reflects the strength of the memory of Jesus' own emphases.

We can be fairly confident that Jesus commenced his short ministry by raising hopes among the people that things could change, in particular, drawing on those positive prophetic predictions about good news for the poor and hungry and promising them and all a feast of well being in the presence of God (Luke 6:20-21; 4:16-20; Matt 11:12; Luke 14:15-24; cf. Isa 25:6-10a). This underlies our eucharist and accounts for the frequency of the imagery among Jesus' sayings and its significance in his meal before his arrest. The poor and hungry were not so much the economically deprived as broken and dejected Israel. Hence the anecdotes portray him reaching out not only to the impoverished but also to those "on the make", including through exploitation and greed (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 15:1-2; 19:1-10). Announcing hope of change he challenged all to change now and to embody that change in their lifestyles, some,

⁶ See Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2.148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), who begins by questioning my conclusion along these lines in William Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues* (BET 23; 2d ed.; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), but then ends by strengthening that conclusion by emphasising the importance of the Sophia/Law tradition in the depiction of Jesus which means that he in his person offered life during his ministry. See also William Loader, "What is 'finished'? Revisiting Tensions in the Structure of Johannine Christology," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. Gilbert Van Belle; BETL 200; Louvain: Peeters, 2007) 457-68.

⁷ Forgiveness features regularly in the speeches in Acts, but as a gift of the risen one (2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38). One can argue that this must presuppose an understanding of Jesus' death as an atoning, a notion present in the gospel only in the narrative of the last meal of Jesus, but that connection is nowhere made explicit in Acts even when one might expect it such as in the exposition of Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40).

quite dramatically by joining him in a travelling homelessness (Mark 1:16-20; 10:17-22), others by staying put, but defying the priorities set by wealth and families' values. The decisive event was this encounter in its various forms. It also included healings, some of which must have happened, while others are doubtless legends, and exorcisms, reflecting the strange demonological presuppositions of his time. Jesus, too, was strange.

The good news was thus the possibility of change, including in the here and now – of which forgiveness of sins was only one element among many. It is not too hard to recognise that one of Christianity's major divides today reflects a choice of emphasis between these two streams, that of Paul and that of Jesus, though to put it this way is to do Paul an injustice. His focus is not in fact on sins, despite his traditions, but on sin and he understands sin as estrangement which has behavioural effects and argues that change comes only when the underlying issue of the estrangement is addressed, not by addressing the behaviours, whether with stern commands or forgiveness. Correspondingly, he saw goodness as something far more than a clean slate. It was to participate in God's goodness, which is characterised by generous outreach in love to all. So what drives the Paul stream today is very much a caricature of Paul.

Diversity also characterises how people saw Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke know the legend of the virginal conception which for its day was a not unfamiliar explanation to account for someone's greatness: "must have been divinely created". Paul, and more elaborately, John explain God's meeting us in Christ by merging him with the Jewish figure, Wisdom or Word, sometimes depicted as a being beside God, while in fact being an aspect of God. John asserts the paradox that the Word was with God and the Word was God, which the church fought to preserve by developing the doctrine of the Trinity and simultaneously refusing to compromise the memory that Jesus was a human being. The other gospels assume no such thing, though Matthew and Luke see Jesus as acting like or at one with the person of Wisdom. Mark, whose Mary obviously knows nothing of her virginal conception, offers no explanations beyond the equipping of the Spirit and sense of being sent with divine authority.⁸ My purpose in depicting such diversity, over which there is a variety of opinions, is to highlight what emerges from careful listening. There are differences. They invite the question: what does faith do with this? The diversity helps us identify what is in common and to view the diverse responses as at least indicating a range of possibilities and perhaps evoking new ones which affirm what is common.

Differences also extended to attitudes towards their (and our) scriptures and evoked similar turbulence and dangerous currents. Some Christian Jews fiercely opposed the setting aside of the requirement of circumcision for non-Jews when they became part of God's people. Their case was clear-cut; Genesis 17 is unambiguous. How could you set aside God's word! Wasn't it just a crude compromise to lure sympathetic non-Jews worried about their genitals? No wonder the early missions were such a success among Gentiles sympathetic to Judaism. But even among those who compromised there was strife. Paul fell out with Peter and even with his companion Barnabas over pressure from James, the brother of Jesus, who controlled the Jerusalem church, that they should not eat together with non-Jews (Gal; 2:11-14). Paul, whose respect for his

⁸ For a recent attempt to argue that the synoptic authors do presuppose Jesus' pre-existence see Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

own people and for the scriptures is not to be doubted, declared that now, believers, Jewish and non-Jewish, were not living under the biblical law, but under Christ's law (Gal 2:18-19; 6:2; Rom 7:1-6). When they did so, he declared, they would more than fulfil the just requirements of the Law (Rom 8:1-4). But this effectively set aside major sections concerned with purity issues and the like. Mark even has Jesus declare that purity laws about such things as food never made sense anyway (7:15-23). Food just goes into the stomach and out into the toilet. If scripture no longer makes sense, you set it aside, especially if it stands in the way of inclusiveness. The response was as vehement then as it is today when similar claims are made. Matthew and Luke, who otherwise love Mark, either revise the passage so that it now becomes a matter of emphasis: external purity matters but not as much as internal purity (Matt 15:1-20), or leave it out altogether (Luke). Interestingly, Jesus' own position was probably along the lines of relative weighting rather than deletion, but his stance of radical love was ultimately responsible for generating radical solutions in the new situations which Paul and Mark faced. So differences over approaches to scripture began generating their strife and bitterness as early as the ministry of Jesus and have been with us since, with, I think, those resisting a flexible approach usually on the wrong side – if you follow Jesus and Paul.

Frequently christology (thinking about who Jesus is) eclipses theology (thinking about who God is) and especially the good news, itself. At worst, the movement becomes a recruitment drive for a Jesus, who like us at times, wants to be the centre of attention and exercise power. This is evident already within the New Testament writings and reflects, to my mind, one of the greatest challenges to those who seek to use the Bible as a resource for faith. The problem relates to our pictures both of Jesus and of God. What is it that we value most? From our songs and liturgies – usually of far greater influence than our sermons – it is easy to gain the impression that we value being the centre of adoration and having power. Images of God in the biblical tradition also reflect such cultural values. Human rulers and their courts serve as models for depicting the divine, right down to court behaviours and patterns of deference. Human fathers serve as models for depicting God as father. Self-serving grandiosity is worthy in a deity – according to the common value system with its understanding of worth and worthiness.

Within the biblical tradition there is evidence that this, the prevailing model, does not remain unchallenged. Jesus' parable of the prodigal son subverts this kind of understanding of God as father (Luke 15:11-32). His images of God as king similarly highlight love and compassion, a strand not absent in some ancient ideologies of kingship, which could speak of the caring shepherd. So the God of Jesus tells people they are worthy and, oddly, we reinforce our disbelief by asserting, "We are unworthy". The power of the image projected from our infantile fantasies of grandeur and thousands of years of (usually male) control is enormous. It usually wins. It lives already in the tensions of the New Testament itself, where juxtaposed to declarations that we love our enemies because God is loving we have threats that one day God will go far beyond what today's human rights would tolerate and arrange for people to be tormented for eternity (Matt 25:31-46). The impact is enormous. It warrants pointless violence (unless vengeance is not pointless), teaches that God is not really loving in the end – the way Jesus has taught us about love, and so effectively makes Jesus an exception in the life of God. Some even depict the resurrection as a reversal of Jesus' values – now he's got what he really wanted: glory. Something is terribly wrong here

and Christian history is full of instances where such images of hate have inspired hate. It is, of course, a tradition not unique to Christians, but we bear such a tradition and its deadly values. We not only need, therefore, to read the New Testament with great respect, but also with great care. It is both life-giving and death-bringing – inescapably, depending in part on how responsibly we approach it as interpreters.

3. Engaging the New Testament as Scripture

I could just pack up my surf board and go home. Who wants turbulence! I often ask myself whether I hang in there just out of force of habit or whether I really think belonging to a community which engages among other things the New Testament is a good place to be for me, for others, and for our world. I think it is and as a biblical scholar I take what I see as a responsibility to encourage and engage in interpreting the New Testament very seriously.

It would be easy to launch into a detailed discussion of fundamentalism, but you are here partly because that is not your stance. For some of you it has been a station on your journey, as it has been for me. Fortunately most fundamentalists are what I call naïve fundamentalists. They have been brought up to believe or converted in a context which believes that the Bible is the Word of God, its propositions infallible and inerrant, and they hold to this as the way they know best. Like the person standing before a great work of art they feel inspired by its stories and live accordingly. Many have grasped the centrality of love and live it. It is fortunate that religion works this way and leaves the tracks of logic. It becomes problematic when people then engage more complex issues of life and now want the work of art to function as a manual of instruction. Let me leave these comments on theory and practice with the encouragement that we recognise this difference. Despite what they claim, most fundamentalists have not read carefully enough and need help to do so in ways that will not bully them or ignore their fears.

An issue, perhaps more pertinent to your concerns, and less recognised is what one might call neo-fundamentalism. It works like this. I have a good idea. I then try to find it in the Bible. Frequently it is not in the Bible, but I skew the material to find it there. I then declare it with biblical warrant. In response I want to say: a good idea is a good idea. It doesn't have to have a biblical warrant to be so. Two things happen here: we don't seem to trust ourselves or our idea enough to make a rational case for it and so supplement weight of argument with weight of what still functions as an authority (The Bible says so); and second, we misuse, misread, misconstrue the New Testament text in much the way as when some people don't listen to you carefully and read in what they want to hear.

There are all too many examples of this approach to scripture. I can remember our minister in my youth discovering popular psychology and then making the claim that Jesus was, of course, the model psychologist – citing, of all things, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. This illustrates a common variant: finding that Jesus modelled or espoused your new insight makes it all the more impressive. So we have had Jesus or the New Testament cited as a model for many causes, all of which I strongly espouse. Jesus leads the way in social justice, is the complete feminist, advocates gay rights, and so on. There is an element of truth in most such claims, but

they are usually extravagant and, in my view, not necessary. It is absurd to imagine that a first century Jesus had a full grasp of the complexities of structural injustice or was mounting a sophisticated movement for social reconstruction. He would come back at us talking about demons. This is not to say that his teaching and behaviour does not embody fundamental expressions of positive valuing of people and striking challenges against systems of power and wealth. We should be cautious about claims that his parables are to be read as deliberate critical commentary on the figures they employ.⁹ When we claim too much – like making a moral about the way he distributes multiplied bread – we strain credibility. We are in danger of doing an injustice to the text. We don't need the text or the tradition of Jesus to address issues of human rights, societal transformation, and appropriate strategies. If we have good ideas and insights they are good ideas and insights and should stand on their own two feet.

I think the same can be said about affirming women. It is an abuse to seek to substantiate our stance by depicting everyone except Jesus in his time as anti-women and discriminatory and Jesus as the pioneer of feminism.¹⁰ Without doubt he included women in his travelling group. Apparently he did not share a fear of women's sexuality as some did.¹¹ I think the values we hear him espousing match and can inspire our affirmation of the worth of women and men, but here, too, we should not claim too much. If his choice of 12 men is historical, then women are notably not among them. His response to a non-Jewish woman and her child's needs, describing them as dogs compared to Jews as children (Mark 7:23-30) is far from inspiring if it is more than a storyteller's slip wanting to celebrate the opposite. We have, in any case, such a slender body of evidence from scarcely a year. It is shaky ground.

Sometimes the reconstructions are more complex. In Crossan's depiction of Jesus (similar to many in the Jesus Seminar, including Marcus Borg) I find a challenging Jesus who fits my theology very well.¹² I have already indicated my concern about the eschatology of eternal judgment and I find his comments about violence insightful.¹³ I also find it hard to embrace what I call the "big bang" model of eschatology, according to which God will soon or one day intervene and establish the kingdom. So when Crossan and Borg argue that Jesus espoused none of these, but that his perspectives are to be found best preserved in the earliest layers of Q and Thomas, I would see that as strikingly compatible with my own faith. Accordingly, Jesus parted company with John the Baptist whose focus was eschatological judgment and the disciples parted company with Jesus in re-espousing such things and only a few groups retained his emphases while the rest all got it wrong, including Paul. I respect

⁹ Cf. William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

¹⁰ Amy-Jill Levine, "Jesus, Gender, and Sexuality: A Jewish Critique," in *The Historical Jesus through Catholic and Jewish Eyes* (ed. B. F. Le Beau et al.; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000) 113-30.

¹¹ See the discussion in William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 55-59.

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 293-304, 419-44; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Marcus Borg, "A Temperate Case for a non-eschatological Jesus," in *Jesus and Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994) 47-68; Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991).

¹³ Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 286-87.

that these are conclusions which they reach not simplistically, but on the basis of decisions they make about the evidence. The same may be said of the very different perspective of Tom Wright, who nevertheless similarly offers me a model which denies the “big bang” eschatology.¹⁴

I find, however, with many others, that the reconstructions do not convince. So much discontinuity between Jesus and John, whom Jesus continues to affirm, and between Jesus and the first disciples, who spent a year with him and claimed his resurrection, is to me scarcely credible.¹⁵ My purpose here is not to engage that argument in depth but to note that their genuinely historical reconstructions have become for many a means of perpetuating a neo-fundamentalism that finds that Jesus really did believe what I want to believe. I think it is better to be uncomfortable, to let Jesus be a first century Galilean Jew, living in a world of demons, on a flat earth, with a big bang eschatology, and doubtless much more belonging to his culture that I would find strange. I don't have to have a Jesus who matches my theology. It is OK to live with his otherness, to let it be, and then to take responsibility for how I then appropriate and respond to the tradition he generated, while acknowledging that what inspires me about him, his radical understanding of God's compassion, is more than enough to keep me going.

Not reading newly cherished values back into the New Testament does not mean ignoring the New Testament. It is a question of integrity, our own and the text's. It is often far better to acknowledge that we may face issues which simply did not surface back then. There is a sense in which the early church faced a similar issue when confronted by whether or not to uphold the biblical demand that all males who join the people of God be circumcised. Jesus had not addressed the issue and apparently had no need to. The argument then arose about what now should apply. Some, of course, insisted, that the requirement in Genesis 17 should still stand. Others, it seems, must have argued from values inherent in the radical inclusiveness of Jesus and the gospel. Thus Paul saw waiving circumcision as an appropriate consequence. In the same way we may find little at times directly addressing current issues on which we need to take a stand and maybe even evidence to the contrary. The answer is then not to abandon the New Testament, but to allow ourselves to be informed by its fundamental values.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) 182-86; 320-68. There he cites his earlier work, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God I; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992): “There is virtually no evidence that Jews were expecting the end of the space-time universe. There is abundant evidence that they . . . knew a good metaphor when they saw one, and used cosmic imagery to bring out the full theological significance of cataclysmic socio-political events” (333; italics as in original). Similarly Wright makes much use of the motif of return from exile. I found this a disturbing feature of the book, because it occurs constantly and frequently feels forced on the material of the gospels, which do include related motifs but these are not all encompassed by that image or necessarily connected with it as motif (e.g. the dominant motif, kingdom), however close its origins may be to the kind of hope expressed in Isa 52:7. See also Carey C. Newman, ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999).

¹⁵ See the discussion in William Loader, “Simple Choices? A Response to John Dominic Crossan,” *Colloquium* 31 (1999) 67-74; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 132-39, 152-54; and Dale C. Allison, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Stephen J. Patterson, ed., *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2001).

This surely is the basis for a commitment to address issues of global warming, for instance. It is also what informs approaches to issues such as the dignity and equality of women, the appropriateness of alternative strategies including divorce to healing broken relationships and beginning again, and respect and acceptance of godly leadership whatever a person's sexual orientation. Ultimately it is the God of compassion and justice whom we encounter in Jesus and through scripture who is our primary reference point, even when the texts themselves may never address our issues. We do not then need to reconstrue the texts to fit. They can be allowed to be the thinking of their world, which will sometimes still address us and sometimes remain alien. Indeed part of acknowledging their holiness and the holiness of others, including God, is to allow them to be what they are – over against us in their own integrity and only so, for us.

For me, then, to engage the New Testament as scripture is to seek to engage it as I do any other person or communication: with critical openness and empathy. I take responsibility for my side of that engagement and try to be in touch with that process, including my propensities toward misreading and my need to be in a community of readers so that I can see what I do not at first see. While I respect the approach already modelled by Matthew and Luke of affirming all but distinguishing core from peripheral and if need be letting core override peripheral, my sympathies are more with Mark who was prepared to assess some things as not making sense, including, as he did, on the basis of wider philosophical reflection in the world of his time. Both stances co-exist in the New Testament and hopefully can still co-exist with respect in the church.

As a New Testament scholar I am privileged not only to be able to read these materials with historical and theological questions in their context, but also to represent and reinterpret them in contemporary contexts, seeking to do so in a way that makes possible new creative encounters for people with their life-giving traditions.¹⁶ Sometimes that means clearing away or restacking debris that blocks the way to the shore. Sometimes it means simply encouraging people to swim between the flags. There is a light of love shining here which lights up my image of God and my awareness of humanity. It still shines for the hungry and poor, for the rich and the exploiters, in the church and beyond it, in other faiths and wherever love is real. And I want to be in a community which knows its nourishment and enabling - because it helps me to swim.

¹⁶ I express with commitment to communicate especially through the resources, including lectionary commentaries, offered on my website: wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader. [ed. Don't put a full stop after www please]