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Modern Biographies of Jesus

Historians often attempt to write biographies of Jesus based on what they take to be plausible reconstructions of his life and teaching.

What follows here are a few summaries of key conclusions reached by some of the most prominent historical Jesus scholars regarding what they believe can be regarded as historically plausible.

Marcus Borg (1942–2015) saw Jesus as a Jewish mystic, a charismatic “Spirit person” who was intent on revitalizing Israel. Jesus claimed an intimacy with God and, throughout his life, experienced visions and other encounters with divine reality that he believed empowered him to accomplish the mission for which God had selected him. This mission involved initiating a religious movement that would prioritize compassion over concern for purity. Thus Jesus opposed the “politics of holiness” that categorized people in his day as “clean or unclean” or even as “Jew or gentile,” and this religious vision led him to be identified as a subversive social reformer. He focused on both personal and political transformation, emphasizing practices rather than beliefs and exemplifying faith through deep commitment and gentle certitude.¹

John Dominic Crossan (1934–) views Jesus as a radical peasant who rebelled against political and religious authorities by defying their conventions. Apparently influenced (either directly or indirectly)

by Cynic philosophy, Jesus taught a new wisdom through parables and aphorisms that pointed out the inherent inadequacies of usual ways of thinking. In conscious resistance to the economic and social tyranny of Roman-occupied Palestine, he proclaimed a vision of life oriented around God's radical justice and adopted a lifestyle intended to emulate this concept. He and his followers chose to live in poverty. Even after he had gained some renown, he performed exorcisms and healings without charge. In violation of accepted taboos, he sought to demonstrate a radical egalitarianism by openly engaging in table fellowship with misfits and outcasts.²

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1938–) thinks that Jesus initiated a social movement that defied the hierarchical society into which he had been born in favor of a vision of inclusive wholeness. He attacked the patriarchal family system of his day by insisting that no one except God should be viewed with the authority given to a father. He sought to create a new community in which women and other basically disenfranchised people could be prominent. He denounced Jewish purity codes as preserving masculine dominance and stressed instead the wisdom tradition of Israel. Indeed, Jesus encouraged people to worship God as Sophia (the female figure portrayed in the Old Testament as a personification of divine wisdom). He thought of himself as the child or prophet of Sophia and so (in spite of being biologically male) presented himself to his followers as an incarnation of the female principle of God.³

Paula Fredriksen (1951–), a Jewish scholar of ancient Christianity, thinks that Jesus was a popular religious teacher from Galilee who, unfortunately, was acclaimed by masses of people in Jerusalem to be the Messiah when he visited that city. Fredriksen reasons that neither Jesus nor his disciples actually made such a claim, but the mere fact that the populace purported Jesus to be the Messiah led Pilate to crucify him in order to disprove that notion and dampen the crowd's enthusiasm. This, in Fredriksen's mind, explains why Pilate did not also condemn Jesus's disciples (who had been innocent of any insurgency).⁴

Richard Horsley (1939–) sees Jesus as standing in the classic tradition of Israelite prophets, which is to say that he must be understood as someone fundamentally concerned with the social and political circumstances of his day. Jesus was a Jewish peasant whose social environment was characterized by a “spiral of violence” involving poverty, oppression, protest, and revolt. His ministry may be understood as fomenting a social revolution on behalf of his fellow peasants. He was not “political” in the sense of seeking transformation from the “top down” (e.g., a change of leadership); rather, he sought to change society from the “bottom up.” His aim was to renew peasant society in a way that would respect the honored traditions of Israel.⁵

John Meier (1942–) describes Jesus as “a marginal Jew”—that is, a Jewish teacher who by circumstance and choice lived on the

margins of his own society, speaking and acting in ways that sometimes made him appear “obnoxious, dangerous, or suspicious to everyone.” He began life as the eldest son of an average peasant family, but as a young adult he abandoned his job as a woodworker and left his home to become a disciple of John the Baptist, who called people to repent in preparation for some sort of imminent divine intervention. Later, he began a public ministry of his own, preaching that God was coming to gather his scattered people and to rule them as their king. Jesus also became widely known as a miracle worker, and this allowed him to claim that, in some sense, God’s reign was already present. In light of this, he presented himself as an authoritative teacher of God’s will, giving his followers clear directives on how God, their king, wanted them to live.⁶

E. P. Sanders (1937–) presents Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose essential mission was to announce a great future event that was about to take place. God was going to intervene directly in history in a way that would involve the elimination of all evil and the dawning of a new age. His vision for this transformation was decidedly Jewish: his selection of twelve disciples was intended to represent the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, and his act of overturning tables in the temple court was a symbolic act presaging that God would raise up a new temple to replace the corrupt one. The most radical aspect of Jesus’s vision was that he promised inclusion in God’s kingdom to sinners without demanding their repentance. He emphasized forgiveness, presenting God as loving

and gracious. His vision for the immediate dawn of God's kingdom turned out to be wrong, and his followers had to reinterpret his message in spiritual terms. This also made the message more appealing to non-Jews.⁷

Geza Vermes (1924–2013), who was a Jewish historian, drew connections between Jesus and other pious, charismatic Jews who were reputed to be miracle workers. Two such persons are especially significant because, according to the Talmud, they operated in first-century Galilee: Honi the Circle Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa. Vermes called Jesus a “hasid,” a type of holy man who, like Honi and Hanina, claimed to draw on the power of God in ways that transcended the usual channels of religious authority. Such persons were heirs of the Israelite prophetic tradition, especially as represented by Elijah and Elisha.⁸

Ben Witherington III (1951–) proposes that Jesus be understood as a Jewish sage who drew heavily on the wisdom traditions of Israel and taught a way of life consonant with the will of God as revealed through nature and commonsense observations about life. Jesus did not speak primarily as a prophet (using the classic “Thus says the Lord” formula), but instead tended to speak on his own authority, as do the authors of wisdom books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The form of his speech, furthermore, was not oracles but rather riddles, parables, aphorisms, and beatitudes. Ultimately, he appears to have understood himself to be the personification of divine

wisdom (Matt. 11:19, 25–27): he believed that he was the wisdom of God descended to earth in human form, and as such, he claimed to be “the revealer of the very mind of God.”⁹

N. T. Wright (1948–) describes Jesus as one who believed that his vocation was to enact what Scripture said God would do. Viewing himself as both prophet and Messiah, he understood his own destiny as symbolizing that of Israel. Thus he performed mighty works intended to signal the fulfillment of prophecy, and he sought to create a community of followers that would represent reconstituted Israel. Eventually, he came to believe that his vocation included dying as the representative of Israel. His death, he thought, would be a way to symbolically undergo the judgment that he had announced for Israel, and it would also serve as a prelude to his own vindication by God. This vindication (his resurrection) would initiate a new covenant with Israel and inaugurate God’s reign as king of the world. In ways like these, Jesus attempted to do and to be what Scripture said God alone could do and be.¹⁰

Where They Agree and Disagree

As these brief sketches reveal, historians disagree on various aspects of how the “historical Jesus” should be construed. There are many matters on which they completely agree (he was Jewish, he taught in parables, he befriended outcasts, he argued with Pharisees, he was crucified, etc.). But there are also disputed topics.

Jewish Orientation

The diversity of first-century Judaism allows various analogies for understanding Jesus: prophet, sage, rabbi, mystic, social reformer. Different historians attempt to understand Jesus in light of these different models; a few historical scholars even move away from Jewish categories altogether, arguing that Jesus was sufficiently Hellenized to be viewed as a generic philosopher.

Political Orientation

Most scholars think that Jesus's concern for justice was more a religious matter than a political one. But others see Jesus as a social revolutionary who challenged the existing order and advocated alternative political agendas and processes.

Vision for the Future

Some scholars say that Jesus announced the imminent end of the world, and he was proven wrong when this did not occur. Others think that Jesus spoke only of some radical transformation of Israel, and this did come about through the destruction of Jerusalem and the growth of the Christian church. A few scholars reject the notion that Jesus had any developed view of the future, assuming that his focus was decidedly on matters of the here and now.

Self-Consciousness

Some scholars believe that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and may even have identified himself as a unique mediator or embodiment of divine presence. Others think that he probably

considered himself to be a prophet or divinely chosen teacher but probably did not interpret his role as unique or unprecedented in the history of Israel. Some historians think that Jesus eschewed all honorary titles for himself and that such descriptions came to be applied to him only later.

1. See Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
2. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
3. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM, 1994).
4. See Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1999).
5. See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
6. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2009).
7. See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993).

8. See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973); *The Real Jesus: Then and Now* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

9. See Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

10. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, *Christian Origins and the Question of God 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

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