

# Who Do I Say Jesus Is?

[OPEN SCORE]

Since I've always comprehended best apophatically, the first half of this paper will partly declare who Jesus is by stating who he is *not*. This will clear the way for the second half, in which I take a cataphatic approach with Jesus of Nazareth. So without further ado, let the minor keyed overture begin.

First, Jesus was not a Cynic sage. Many people say Jesus is not the Messiah, but at least he was a well-known guru of wisdom and knowledge. This is a Jesus constructed by Dominic Crossan, Burton Mack, and others from the Jesus Seminar. Some, like Burton, assume he must have been a *Cynic*, but as Craig Keener points out, “the problem is Mack’s faulty assumption that such sage characteristics must make Jesus like a Cynic, when we know that *Jewish* sages abounded in Galilee, and we lack evidence for any Cynic ones there.”<sup>1</sup> There will soon be a thread forming, but let this be the first strand: “Whereas eschatology tends to be distinctively Jewish, highlighting Jesus’ “sage” features can allow for a less ethnic-specific feel to Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Next, Jesus was not a prophet who was slightly out of his mind. Many people say Jesus is not the Messiah, but at least he was a good man, albeit deranged since he thought himself to be an eschatological king and judge. Dale Allison Jr. writes that John Knox, an ordained Episcopalian, thought “no sane person from any time or place could entertain the thoughts that Jesus entertains in the Gospels.”<sup>3</sup> This assumption fails to seriously consider Jesus’ Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Dale Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 251.

context, for after giving numerous bits of evidence from Scripture and the pseudepigrapha, Allison asserts “Jesus’ Jewish world was quite familiar with the idea of a human being serving as eschatological king and/or judge.”<sup>4</sup> Let that be the second strand.

Furthermore, Jesus was not an iconoclast who rejected his Jewishness and the Torah. Many people say Jesus is not the Messiah, but at least he freed his followers from Jewish legalism. I, on the other hand, agree with Daniel Boyarin, “Counter to most views of the matter, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus kept kosher, which is to say that he saw himself not as abrogating the Torah but as defending it.”<sup>5</sup> By examining the seventh chapter of Mark and Pharasaic tradition, Boyarin argues Jesus’ Judaism was only a reaction, curbing the pernicious innovations which the Pharisees and Scribes of Jerusalem were placing over the Torah. It is unfortunate many Christian preachers and scholars have interpreted Scripture to mean Jesus permitted all the foods which the Torah forbid the Jews to eat and then assumed a supercessionist attitude. Let this be the third strand: “In short, if the earliest of Christians believed that Jesus kept kosher, then we have good reason to view Christianity as another contending branch of Judaism.”<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, Jesus was not a religious reformer who, although starting a substantial world religion, failed miserably during his life. Indeed, many people say Jesus is not the Messiah, but at least he was passionate and tried his best to overcome corruption. Their evidence? Usually the account in which Jesus overturns the tables in the temple. Sanders contends, “If Jesus were a religious reformer, however, bent on correcting ‘abuse’ and ‘present practice’, we should hear

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<sup>4</sup> Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 253.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 106.

charges of immorality, dishonesty and corruption directed *against the priests*. But such charges are absent from the Gospels (except for Mark 11:17), and that is not the thrust of the action in the temple.”<sup>7</sup> In a more extreme manner, S. G. F. Brandon viewed that “Jesus’ action was part of a carefully planned attempt to take the leadership of the country by arms.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, let us put the sword back in its place for there is little evidence which correlates Jesus to insurrectionist activity.<sup>9</sup> The righteous anger episode in the temple intended to make a point rather than to start a revolution. To conclude this overture, it is pertinent to note this paragraph was not necessarily a strand, but an aglet to the preceding three pieces of evidence.

Into what do all these strands combine? They form a thread portraying Jesus without fully respecting his Jewish context. We will now directly address this issue. Since the apophatic approach to Jesus is completed, the musical score consequently flips from a minor musical key to a major one to engage Jesus cataphatically. This is where the truly vibrant music begins.

It is important to first note Jesus was a Jew who heard shofaroth, chatzotzeroth, and chalilim. These were instruments used in the Second Temple period and assist me in placing Jesus in a particular context of history.<sup>10</sup> In other words, he never heard a Stradivarius violin or a Steinway piano, which were respectively made in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Jesus rather heard prototypes of trumpets and oboes in the first century within Palestine. Additionally, these brass and wind instruments were of a particular kind; they were blown in the Jerusalem

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<sup>7</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Idelsohn. *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development* (New York: Dover, 1992), 9.

temple and associated with special ceremonies.<sup>11</sup> Combined with the fact Jesus' family was righteous (Mark 1:19) and upheld God's covenant to the best they could, I assert Jesus honored his heritage by attending festivals in Jerusalem. Consequently he heard shofaroth, chatzotzeroth, and chalilim during the Jewish ceremonies.

Secondly, Jesus had a heart for the temple. He not only visited it and heard these instruments, He deeply cherished and respected his Father's house. Within the well-known passage in which Jesus cleanses the temple, a gem hides in the rough. "There is one material detail that more than anything else reveals Jesus' motivation. It is in the sentence only found in Mark (another significant phrase Luke and Matthew did not care to copy): 'He did not allow anyone to carry an object through the sanctuary.'"<sup>12</sup> This not only gives me a clearer picture of who Jesus was, but it leads me to the Father and instills within me a respect for the high sacrality of God's house, in which I work and worship each week.

Thirdly, Jesus was an innocent man but died by crucifixion. This is where history and interpretation inextricably mingle with each other more pertinently; indeed, the orchestra crescendos with a peculiar tension. Why? The passion accounts are not very clear in demonstrating Pilate's motive for sentencing Jesus, and not much is known how the Jewish court system operated in Jerusalem or about the imperial legates handling Roman public law at that time. Why are the details missing? The writers of the Gospels "meant to write a theologically interpreted history of the events and ended by writing what was taken for literal history, a history all but impossible to reconstruct with precision, however much individual details can be verified

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<sup>11</sup> Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *The Cambridge Companion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 38.

or declared probable.”<sup>13</sup> The next question would be, ‘What then is the theological interpretation the Gospel writers held?’ The crucifixion means nothing without the following:

Jesus was resurrected and proved himself to be the Messiah. The orchestra climaxes and is the most gorgeous music to my ears. For although many scholars often ignore or sideline Jesus’ resurrection as historically nonexistent or irrelevant, it is of extreme importance. Two points will now be made: the Jewishness of the resurrection and a defense for the veracity of the gospels. First, far from being a Pauline invention within a Hellenistic culture, the resurrection is a deeply Jewish notion. “Indeed, no Roman soldier said to be guarding the tomb that first Easter Sunday morning could have described the events in terms of “resurrection”: that language was simply unavailable.”<sup>14</sup> Only a Pharisaic Jew could readily describe the happenings of Jesus as a resurrection.

Secondly, specifically addressing form criticism, the Gospels are not products of altering the Jesus traditions and texts to accommodate early Christian Gentile churches. “What is striking in the Gospels is not so much their adaptation to the needs of post-70 Gentile communities but precisely the remarkable *lack* of such accommodation, whether linguistically, religiously, geographically, historically, legally, or theologically.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, also parrying against form criticism and oral tradition, the Gospels were not radically tampered with from the time Jesus died to the end of the first century. Besides the high appreciation of *oral history* and *testimony* within the beginning two centuries, there were controls in place. The church in Jerusalem was

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<sup>13</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, “Compleat History of the Resurrection: A Dialogue with N. T. Wright” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, 4 (2004): 497.

<sup>15</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 210.

one such control and its ‘paradosis’ (meaning a careful custodianship of something in order to steward it to the next generation) is another. The Gospels can be trusted. Indeed, “Testimony asks to be trusted. The witness says not only ‘I was there’ but also ‘believe me.’”<sup>16</sup> So, I will – Many people say Jesus is not the Messiah, *but. I. do.* And the symphony definitively concludes the coda.

[CLOSE SCORE]

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 489.

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