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RE-IMAGINING JESUS **Making Faith Credible to Secularists in an Age of Science**

1 Some recent years ago, a team of Bible scholars got together and formed what became popularly known as the Jesus Seminar. They set themselves the task of discerning what can be asserted of the man Jesus, the historical Jesus. Seeking to strip away all the theologizing and myth-making that surrounds any figure from antiquity, they sought to answer two questions.

2 What did the historical Jesus actually say? And what did the historical Jesus actually do? They subsequently published two volumes of scholarly speculations with those titles.

3 Without pretending to the academic qualifications of these pioneers, I nevertheless offer in this posting my own speculations on these same topics. Who was the real Jesus? What was his message? What in his ministry actually happened? And what implications might we find here for Christian worship today?

4 In simpler terms: I offer the following paragraphs as an attempt to make the Christian faith credible to contemporary people who regard themselves as secularists or even atheists, in an age increasingly devoted to science and technology, devoted to the rigors of scientific truth.

5 As I have argued before in these postings, my Lutheran theological tradition does not fear scholarship. Including Biblical scholarship. It does not fear poetry or myth or metaphor. These paragraphs, far from seeking to destroy or to discredit the life of faith, seek to make it credible – believable – to modern people. Attractive, even.

6 So I take the risk of offending you, faithful reader, with my perhaps heterodox speculations in these paragraphs. But my intention is the opposite: To make the Christian faith believable to secularists. To make the faith credible – to me! So this posting is quite unapologetically personal.

7 Here then is my personal apologetic exercise. I should confess it is still unfinished. It is still “under construction.” I am attempting in these paragraphs to “give an account of the hope that is in me...” . I Peter 3:15

8 The first and most shocking conclusion I reach, following my understanding of recent scholarly speculation, is this: Jesus did NOT think of himself as Messiah.

Instead, Jesus thought of himself in the line of Jewish prophets and teachers. As a prophet, not in the sense of one who predicts the future, but rather in the sense of one who “tells it like it is.” Jesus is a prophet in the sense we find in Hebrew scripture. Isaiah. Jeremiah. Micah.

9 Subsequent generations of Christians DID think Jesus was Messiah, I should hasten to note. But Jesus himself in his lifetime did not. I appeal here to the so-called Messianic Secret in the Gospel of Mark, where again and again, Jesus reminds would-be followers, in effect, “Don’t say that! Don’t tell anyone I’m Messiah!”

10 My conclusion is that, like other Jews of the day, Jesus was waiting for the Messiah still to come, waiting with eager anticipation for the coming of the Dominion of God in its fulness.

11 But significantly, Jesus is NOT waiting. Jesus is claiming today the authorities and presumptions of the Messiah-still-to-come.

12 It’s as if Jesus is saying, “I am going to do TODAY what the Messiah will do when Messiah gets here...” And I am going to give my followers the authorities to do the same.

13 So Jesus presumes to forgive sins. In Jesus’ day, the popular assumption was that only God could forgive sins. And only then at the End of the Age. When the Dominion of God comes in its fulness. Jesus says no, I am going to forgive sins. And here and now!

14 Further: Jesus gives his followers the authority to forgive sins as well. Not waiting for Messiah to come. Not waiting for “Heaven”.

15 So also Jesus welcomes women into the Kingdom. In Jesus’ day, women – even wives! – were simply the property of men. Jesus welcomes children as well. Slaves. The un-circumcised.

16 Jesus expands the popular assumptions about who is in and who is out. Jesus’ welcome is truly “catholic”. Jesus’ embrace is all-inclusive. And proleptic: Jesus anticipates the coming Dominion of God. Jesus promises – and gives – tomorrow’s gifts and graces, TODAY.

17 AND Jesus gives his followers the authority to do the same.

18 The fancy twenty dollar term for this is eschatological prolepsis. See Essay 246 above. Christians today – hey, human beings today! – don’t have to wait for “heaven”. The Dominion of God is already here, among us today. With all its gifts and graces.

19 A prime example of eschatological prolepsis can be found in Jesus’ own words: In the Lord’s Prayer. In the fourth petition of that magisterial prayer, Jesus uses an unfamiliar term for daily bread. It’s a term Jesus borrows from the Roman army, and it refers to the ration of food that Roman soldiers received every day – for the next day!

20 It’s the bread we get today that we shouldn’t be getting until tomorrow. Eschatological prolepsis in action! See the footnote in the New Revised Standard

Version at Matthew 6:11: Footnote h: "...Give us today our bread for tomorrow..."
Tomorrow's gifts and graces today!

21 All of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer may be understood from this perspective. From the perspective of The Eschaton: The coming of the Dominion of God in all its fulness. Hey, all of Jesus' MINISTRY may be understood from the perspective of eschatological prolepsis.

22 In fact, Jesus' embrace of eschatological prolepsis was at least partly the reason for Jesus' running afoul of the authorities, both religious and civic. It's what got Jesus killed. "He has made himself equal to God..." John 5:18. Jesus is a threat to the priests. And to the emperor!

23 This brings us to Jesus' crucifixion, and The Cross. I am dissatisfied with traditional explanations of Jesus' death. It is sometimes argued – the so-called Anselmic View of the Atonement – that the righteousness of God demands an expiation in blood. The Father sends the Son to die on the cross "for the sins of the world".

24 That strikes me more as Child Abuse than as Good News. The whole idea of the crucifixion of Jesus as Redemptive Violence has long past its usefulness. Or persuasiveness. It is – like not a few other items you could mention in the Christian Tradition – a relic of medieval barbarism.

25 Why not simply interpret Jesus' death on the cross as a model, an example, of what often happens when Goodness, Justice, Truth, and Righteousness confront this world's Powers and Principalities? When love meets power? Love sometimes suffers.

26 Now: How might all of the above affect Christian worship? I would not argue to change anything in the traditional forms of our Sunday Service: The Mass, The Eucharist, The Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper.

27 With two exceptions. I'd argue for changing the language of the Lord's Prayer to follow the NRSV footnote I cite above in 19. I'd like to see us pray, "...Give us today our bread for tomorrow..."

28 And it's probably closer to Jesus' intentions to say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The Presbyterians had it right all along!

29 Jesus and his words and works, his message and his ministry, remain for me an incredible insight into what Christians have identified as God. The Three Great Intangibles that give life meaning – The Good, the True, and the Beautiful – are on display in this one person's life and words and works.

30 This re-imagining of the historic Jesus, in another way of speaking – his words and his works, his message and his ministry – are not diminished, in my view, by this re-imagining. On the contrary, for me, Jesus and his life and work are enlarged and ennobled in this re-imagining.

31 In a subsequent posting, I'll re-imagine the meaning of prayer.

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