

The Historical Jesus and the Temple: Memory, Methodology, and the Gospel of Matthew

In this book, Michael Patrick Barber examines the role of the Jerusalem temple in the teaching of the historical Jesus. Drawing on recent discussions about methodology and memory research in Jesus studies, he advances a fresh approach to reconstructing Jesus's teaching. Barber argues that Jesus did not reject the temple's validity but that he likely participated in and endorsed its rites. Moreover, he locates Jesus's teaching within Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, showing that Jesus's message about the coming kingdom and his disciples' place in it likely involved important temple and priestly traditions that have been ignored by the quest. Barber also highlights new developments in scholarship on the Gospel of Matthew to show that its Jewish perspective offers valuable but overlooked clues about the kinds of concerns that would have shaped Jesus's outlook. A bold approach to a key topic in biblical studies, Barber's book is a pioneering contribution to Jesus scholarship.

Michael Patrick Barber is Professor of Scripture and Theology at the Augustine Institute Graduate School. He is co-author, with Brant Pitre and John Kincaid, of *Paul, A New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology* (Eerdmans, 2019).

The Historical Jesus and the Temple

*Memory, Methodology, and
the Gospel of Matthew*

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Foreword by Dale C. Allison, Jr.



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For Kim

“You surpass them all.”

(Proverbs 31:29)

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Foreword

Dale C. Allison, Jr.

The publication of academic books about the historical Jesus continues apace, so much so that no one can any longer keep up: we are all overwhelmed. One may, as a result, be tempted to hope that, despite all the advertising blurbs to the contrary, the new volumes must be reruns, little more than old songs in a new key. Can there really be anything new to say? Yet, as readers of Michael Barber's book will discover, there are.

The Historical Jesus and the Temple contributes to the ongoing debates in at least three major ways. First, the book matters because it exemplifies a way forward methodologically. Over the past several decades and continuing into the present, perhaps most historians have sought to distinguish fiction from history and so recover the figure behind the gospels by deploying the so-called criteria of authenticity; above all, multiple attestation, dissimilarity, embarrassment, and coherence. Scholars have been like the angels of Matt 13:24–30, 37–43: they have endeavored to uproot the fictional weeds, bind them into bundles to be ignored, and then gathered the historical wheat into their books and articles. A growing chorus of voices, however, has registered dissatisfaction with the conventional strategies. Barber has listened to them and their complaints, and he concurs that the standard criteria have too often functioned as walls that have imprisoned historical imagination.

Yet how, if the standard tools are of questionable or limited utility, can we stay in business? How do we, while recognizing that the gospels are later interpretations and expansions of social memories, carry on the quest for the historical Jesus? Barber sensibly suggests that, “rather than looking for an uninterpreted Jesus *behind* the Gospels, the historian's best way forward is to begin with a different question: *Which interpretations*

of Jesus likely bring us closest to history?” (p. 234). He proposes that we undertake this task by: (1) searching for recurrent patterns in the sources; (2) contemplating those patterns in the light of what we otherwise know of Second Temple Judaism; and (3) deciding whether directly associating the historical Jesus with this or that pattern best explains the content and shape of some aspect of early Christian thought. Barber does, to be sure, occasionally endeavor to secure a place in Jesus’s life for a specific saying or story; but his major conclusions do not, as he emphasizes, rest upon his ability to do that. The upshot is that these pages instruct us on how we can obtain solid results and gain valuable insights without wielding the old criteria. Indeed, in Barber’s book – which consistently strives for the probable rather than the possible – the criterion of dissimilarity gets turned upside down, and time and again we see how positing continuity between Jesus and his later followers has more explanatory power than positing discontinuity.

Barber’s second major contribution is to make a strong case that, in more than one area, a characteristically Matthean interpretation preserves rather than distorts the memory of Jesus. Going back to Adolf Harnack, F. C. Burkitt, and T. W. Manson, many have found the historical Jesus above all in Q and/or Mark. In their judgment, so-called M material and Matthean redaction are, almost always, sources not for Jesus but for later ecclesiastical interests and settings. Barber rejects this simple antithesis. He is right to do so.

Over the course of my own study of Matthew, I have occasionally concluded that, in this or that respect, the First Gospel represents the past better than the Second Gospel. I have decided, for example, that Matthew’s law-abiding Jesus (see esp. 5:17–20) is more credible than Mark’s more liberal (and perhaps Pauline?) Jesus; that Mark 8:27–30 might be a truncated version of a story better preserved in the fuller Matt 16:13–20; that Matt 18:3 (“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”) is, on the whole, probably more primitive than Mark 10:15 (“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”); that the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, found in Matthew 28 but not in Mark 16, is likely historical; and that the typological comparison of Jesus to Moses, which is implicit at points in Mark but much clearer and more developed in Matthew, is rooted in Jesus’s self-conception. Yet I had never, before reading Barber, thought about all these things at once, and so I had never fully shed the old habit of equating the uniquely Matthean with the undoubtedly secondary. This volume, however, has moved me

to rethink things. Barber demonstrates between the covers of one book the multiple ways in which the First Gospel – in its presentation of Jesus’s relationship to the temple, to Davidic motifs, and to traditions about sacrifice and priesthood – plausibly mirrors what Jesus himself taught, and shows us that, in important ways, Matthew’s interpretive framework is not an obstacle in our way but a path to the historical Jesus. The latter is not buried beneath Matthew but stares at us from its surface.

The third major contribution of *The Historical Jesus and the Temple* is Chapter 7, which focuses on cultic traditions in Matthew, on imagery surrounding sacrifice, and on priestly matters. There can be no doubt that the Protestant orientation of most modern exegetes and critical historians of Jesus has led us astray here. As Barber writes: “Given the history of prejudice against ritual and cult inherited by modern biblical scholarship, it is not surprising that allusions to Israel’s liturgical traditions have often been dismissed. In general, one gets the sense that contemporary exegetes have the impression that such imagery occurs sparsely” (p. 222). Yet “it is broadly attested” and is “fully consistent with Jesus’s identity as a first-century Jewish teacher.”

This is an eye-opening chapter and really does mark a break with our guild’s tradition. There is nothing or next to nothing on Jesus and priestly motifs in the pertinent writings of Johannes Weiss or Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann or Günther Bornkamm, C. H. Dodd or T. W. Manson, Norman Perrin or Joachim Jeremias, E. P. Sanders or John Dominic Crossan. Yet, as Barber demonstrates, there are indeed cultic and priestly motifs in Matthew as well as the other canonical gospels, and they are more than meager. Once they are spotted, the topic of their meaning and possible relationship to Jesus naturally follows. In this endeavor, Barber is a pioneer.

Having highlighted several ways in which Barber’s contribution is important, I could continue; my comments hardly exhaust its significance. I am, for instance, intrigued by his suggestions about a possible divine christology in Matthew. I trust, however, that I have said enough to establish that Barber’s well-informed and thought-provoking book is a genuine contribution to the study of the historical Jesus.