



Inquiry about and from Jesus

Jesus emerges in the history of ancient Israel, and he cannot be separated from it, if we are to understand him as a figure in human history. Israel's ancient history, however, is drenched in the blood of holy war in the name of God, the supposed Father of Jesus. Many people rightly doubt that all of the blood spilled there is redemptive in turning something bad into something good. If real, the alleged good involved often eludes the perception of many of us, through no evident fault of our own.

We should ask how Jesus fits into Israel's ancient history of holy war, if he does fit. Our answer will attend to Jesus's own understanding of his role in holy war, and it thus will clarify the relation of Jesus to the God of ancient Israel. In doing so, our answer will reveal a portrait of Jesus that is neglected by many commentators on his life and work and by many of his self-avowed followers, early and late. We shall see that Jesus's chosen conflict is not military but moral-theological, aimed at divine-human reconciliation in God's goodness. We may understand *moral* goodness broadly in terms of the *supreme* good, bearing on personal character, virtue, and action and thus on value, praiseworthiness, and rightness, individually and interpersonally. Even so, divine goodness is not reducible to moral goodness, because it includes goodness in domains other than the moral domain, including the cognitive and prudential domains.

Why bother with Jesus *at all*? He evidently is second to none in attracting attention from inquirers about human history, inside and outside the academic world, and the range of those inquirers is vast in diversity of perspectives and interests. Why all of this interpretive flurry, past and present, about *Jesus*, an obscure Galilean Jew put to death by the Roman government after upsetting the Jewish leaders by creating a ruckus in their temple? We can approach an initial answer.

1.1 A REASON TO INQUIRE

Different inquirers about Jesus often have different motives and perspectives, with no easy or uneasy means of reconciliation. Let us not miss the obvious, however: Much of the inquiry about Jesus arises from questions about his representing, or relating people to, *God*. His supposed *theological*, or Godward, importance underlies the lion's share of attention to him, and this goes beyond his mere historical, moral, sociological, or ecclesiastical significance and influence. Many inquirers ask about him because they want to ask about *God through him*, if implicitly. Whether they get good answers is, of course, a separate matter.

Inquiry about Jesus eventually leads us to an important feature of his: his *intentional impact* on inquirers. The relevant evidence, we shall see, includes some repeating patterns of literary evidence in the synoptic Gospels. This evidence is best understood in terms of the intentional impact of Jesus himself on his disciples, given that he did not produce writings for posterity.

James D. G. Dunn remarks: "All we have are the impressions which Jesus made."¹ These "impressions" include

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1: *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 329. This observation has antecedents in Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. C. E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964 [1892]), pp. 79, 87, 90, 94, and in Ernst Troeltsch, *Glaubenslehre* (Berlin: Duncker, 1925); Troeltsch, *The Christian*

“Jesus remembered,” as Dunn notes, but the impact can extend to past and present readers of the synoptic Gospels. This is plausible if William Manson is right: “The main factor in the formation of the Christian narratives was the initial, specifically religious impression produced upon the mind of the community by Jesus himself.”² In this general vein, Dale C. Allison reports: “I find it very difficult to come away from the primary sources doubting that I have somehow met a strikingly original character. I seem to have a permanent and vivid impression of who he must have been.”³ This consideration figures, as Allison notes, in a method of historical inquiry that proceeds by abduction, or inference to a best available explanation, regarding our literary historical data.

In general, we seek historical interpretations of Jesus that make the best available sense of the impressions he left on his audience. They will offer the best available answers to such questions as: Why did Jesus leave these particular impressions on his audience rather than some other impressions? Why did he leave these impressions rather than no impressions at all? Such questions are explanation-seeking, and they will guide a historically responsible interpretation of Jesus. They seek explanations that best fit our overall evidence, without neglect, distortion, or extravagance toward it. We thus can agree with E. P. Sanders: “The only way to proceed in the search for the historical Jesus is to offer hypotheses based on the

Faith, trans. G. E. Paul (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 101. See also Paul E. Davies, “Impact and Response,” *Interpretation* 18 (1964), 276–84. Davies comments: “All we have from Jesus is the impact he made on [people] and their response to him in hostility, indifference, or faith. The Gospel account was written in these terms and within this limitation” (278).

² William Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), p. 45.

³ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 23. See also Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 29. For discussion of some needed constraints on memory in this context, see Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, pp. 435–62, Richard Bauckham, “The General and the Particular in Memory,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14 (2016), 28–51, and Allison, “Memory, Methodology, and the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14 (2016), 13–27. See also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 130–4, 327–38.

evidence and to evaluate them in light of how satisfactorily they account for the materials in the Gospels, while also making Jesus a believable figure in first-century Palestine and the founder of a movement which eventuated in the church.”⁴

Allison, Dunn, and Manson have used an abductive approach to illuminate the self-understanding of Jesus, with Dunn and Manson identifying historical evidence for Jesus’s “sense of intimate sonship before God.”⁵ In the same vein, Oscar Cullmann has identified the life of Jesus as the basis in two areas for our understanding him: “in Jesus’s own self-consciousness and in the concrete presentiment his person and work evoked among the disciples and the people.”⁶ If we understand “presentiment” broadly as “response to an impact,” we can agree with Cullmann, Manson, Dunn, and Allison in favoring an abductive approach sensitive to the impact, including the intentional impact, of Jesus on his audience. Disputes about details can, and will, continue, but we should be able to use abduction thus oriented to fill in much of the striking image left by the impact of Jesus on his audience. In doing so, we will be using a method common to historical inquiry in general.

It would be implausible to assume that people influenced by the impact of Jesus must or even always distort Jesus beyond recognition. William Manson comments:

The faith of the Christian society penetrates and suffuses the matter of the tradition: we see Jesus in the light of the

⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 166–7.

⁵ See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 762, and Manson, *Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 105–9; cf. Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, pp. 221–304, and Allison, *The Historical Christ*, pp. 64–6. For a recent use of abduction (arguably over-extended at points) to capture the self-understanding of Jesus, see Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On the broader role of abduction in relation to religious experience and theological belief, see Paul K. Moser, *Understanding Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chaps. 7–8.

⁶ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 317.

community's faith and love. But this glow or aureole in which the glory of the risen Lord blends to some extent with the lineaments of the Jesus of history does not mean that the image of Jesus as he was on earth is so refracted as no longer to appear in its reality . . . Within the tradition the "I-Thou" relation of his word to us is maintained with unmistakable clearness.⁷

"Unmistakable clearness" aside, this chapter will return to the "I-Thou" relation between Jesus and his audience, but the point now is that it was a live option for the original hearers of Jesus to convey his impact on them accurately. Indeed, it would be puzzling if that audience had no interest in representing Jesus as he actually was. A concern for accuracy about Jesus would be included in the audience's concern to represent *Jesus* rather than someone else. At least part of that audience gives us the definite impression of wanting to represent Jesus as he was, at least on some matters of importance.

This book uses evidence from history and experience to clarify the impact of Jesus on various inquirers. It attends to a special but widely neglected feature of his intentional impact: *his inquiry of us as inquirers*. In doing so, it puts our inquiry of him in a challenging context, namely, the context of his illuminating inquiry of us. This approach leads to an impact–response model of theological interpretation (we will call it *theistic accountableism*), where interpreters are accountable for their responses, including their ethical and religious responses, to the relevant impact of Jesus and God on them.

C. F. D. Moule notes: "The historian can observe, within the limits set by the data, both the historical figure [of Jesus] and the symptoms of subsequent religious experience [of him], but if he is both properly inquisitive and honest, he is bound to pay attention also to what is implied by the

⁷ Manson, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 32.

religious symptoms, although this itself belongs outside the strictly historical purview.”⁸ He thus asks “whether it is not right and proper to hold the historical and the ‘trans-historical’ together in a single continuum, albeit without any blurring of the respective limits and frontiers of the two.”⁹ He also wonders whether strictly historical work about Jesus can be illuminated by religious considerations of a historically transcendent Jesus that cannot be reduced to strict history.¹⁰ We will benefit, from an explanatory point of view, by going beyond a “strictly historical purview” to relevant considerations of moral and religious experience, while giving our historical evidence its due.

We shall see that Jesus engaged in inquiry of his inquirers in order to prompt them to undergo moral self-reflection and decision-making *in relation to God*. Apart from such reflection and decision-making, our scriptural and historical interpretations of Jesus will miss his intended impact, omitting how we are to be related to the morally challenging personal subject of our inquiry and his (Jesus’s) relation to God. We shall see how this consideration yields an effective, experience-based method for human inquiry about Jesus and God.

Our impact–response model of interpretation will be distinctive in making inquiry about Jesus go beyond ordinary scriptural and historical interpretation to a use of abductive, or explanatory, reason based in an inquirer’s *moral experience*. This interpretive model matters, beyond historical or academic controversy about Jesus, in relation to questions about an inquirer’s moral experience and standing before God and Jesus. This model thus will fit with what we shall identify as a central concern expressed by Jesus. We shall see how our interpretive model is irreducibly interpersonal and ethical, and how it can be

⁸ C. F. D. Moule, “The Gravamen against Jesus,” in Moule, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (London: SPCK, 1998), pp. 105–6.

⁹ Moule, “The Gravamen against Jesus,” p. 113.

¹⁰ Moule, “The Gravamen against Jesus,” p. 99.

self-revealing for persons regarding their moral status in relation to God and Jesus.

How we inquire about Jesus and God matters, because trustworthy inquiry must fit with its subject matter, in a way that allows its subject to present itself (or, in this case, Jesus himself) accurately to inquirers. A use of abductive reason based in moral experience must be added to history and scripture, if we are to represent and know who Jesus truly was and is. We thus shall see that the triad of history, scripture, and experience benefits, in representing Jesus on the basis of his impact, by being grounded in moral experience of a kind to be clarified.

A key issue concerns the impact of Jesus as including *volitional* confrontation with his audience – that is, the power of his manifested moral will or intention in confrontation with an inquirer's will, without coercing the latter will. As Leander Keck has observed: "His good news about the impingement of God's kingdom implied that his hearers *can* respond appropriately, though it is not easy to allow God's character to reshape one into a son or daughter of God."¹¹

Seeking divine–human reconciliation, Jesus intended the moral power of his will to *attract* sympathetic cooperation, including uncoerced agreement in action, from inquirers in relation to God's goodness represented by him. He thought of such reconciliation as part of God's redemptive will or intention for a morally flourishing life among humans, and he thought of the moral power manifested as a portrayal of divine goodness, including divine love for humans. In general, we may think of God's *redemptive will* for divine–human reconciliation in terms of God's powerful but uncoercive directedness toward divine goodness in interpersonal relationships.

¹¹ Leander Keck, *Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 103. See also Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 192.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition, offers the following definitions of “reconciliation”: (1) “The action of restoring humanity to God’s favour, especially as through the sacrifice of Christ; the fact or condition of a person’s or humanity’s being reconciled with God.” (2) “The action of restoring estranged people or parties to friendship; the result of this; the fact of being reconciled.”¹² Arguably, the best understanding of Christian “atone-ment,” “redemption,” or “salvation” is in terms of human cooperative reconciliation to God as a divine gift. In any case, we see a pattern of attempted reconciliation in the ministry of Jesus, including in his eating with social outcasts and in his calling wayward people to follow him to trust and to obey God.

Inquirers will not experience the reality of the divine moral power on offer for what it is intended to be if they omit their freely given, sympathetic cooperation as a result of either their indifference or their opposition. The intended moral power would be *in cooperative interaction* with God, when a cooperative inquirer is, by uncoerced attraction, led closer in volition to God’s moral character and will. Without the sympathetic cooperation, the divine power would not come to its intended fruition, and therefore it would not be experienced by an uncooperative inquirer for what it is intended to be by God. So, the moral response of an inquirer matters significantly, from an experiential, a moral, and a cognitive point of view. As a result, what an inquirer values relative to divine goodness looms large in this context.

Some theologians balk at a role for human cooperation in the divine redemption of humans based on the assumption that such a role would be “Pelagian.” This is a serious mistake. A role for human cooperation would preserve a role for *responsible persons* as genuine moral agents, but it would not entail their *earning* or *meriting* divine approval.

¹² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

It thus would not threaten divine grace. Obeying need not be earning at all. If we omit a role for genuine human cooperation, we will exclude the status of genuine, responsible persons to be reconciled to God. We then will have at most a controlling divine will oblivious to human agency. In that case, commands to humans to obey God, such as those represented by Jesus, will be pointless and even misleading with regard to attracting humans to divine–human reconciliation. God’s will then would be the sole relevant cause.

A key issue concerns how Jesus effectively can represent God’s moral will to inquirers, against the historical background of how he intended to represent God. If real, God would exist at a level of moral depth deeper than that of typical human existence, given that God as worthy of worship would be morally perfect. In addition, such a God would aim to attract and to lead inquirers toward God’s level of moral depth, with their sympathetic cooperation, for the sake of their having distinctive evidence of God’s reality and their knowing God. Jesus, we shall see, claimed to have a unique, God-appointed role in that aim, and he acted accordingly. This consideration figures in the astonishing amount of attention he has received from inquirers. Such attention makes good sense in the light of the portrait of Jesus to be offered here. It also fits with what we will identify as his intended impact, in relation to divine goodness, on inquirers about him.

1.2 HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

Where should an inquiry about Jesus begin, regarding who he was and is, and how should it proceed? It may be easier to state where such an inquiry should *not* begin and how it should *not* proceed. For instance, it should not begin with an ahistorical systematic theology or a dogmatic creed about who Jesus is. Otherwise, we easily can end up with the tail wagging the dog, with our theological preferences defining Jesus in ways that obscure the historical reality

about him. Instead, we should start with our actual evidence regarding Jesus, allowing the real Jesus to emerge, even if in conflict with our preferences about him. We then shall have an opportunity not to construct Jesus in our own preferred image. We thus shall try to avoid George Tyrell's image of inquirers representing Jesus by seeing their own faces reflected as they peer into a deep well.¹³

What actual evidence of ours regarding Jesus can aid our inquiry? The plot thickens with this question because people dispute what is our actual evidence about Jesus. Some people endorse a kind of extreme skepticism regarding Jesus that leaves us with very little, if anything, to trust about him. We should not *start* there, however, because we first must consider relevant evidence to see if it is trustworthy.

Some inquirers will invoke evidence about Jesus from their religious experiences, and that may or may not be acceptable *in the end*. We shall see the importance of relating any evidence from religious experience to our relevant historical evidence, if only to curb distortion of the Jesus of history. For now, then, we should consider what some of our oldest historical testimonies regarding Jesus have to say and what is their supporting evidence. Included in the New Testament, they merit the close attention of anyone inquiring about Jesus as (at least) a historical figure, because they claim to represent the impact of Jesus himself on his earliest historical audience. C. H. Dodd has remarked: "The first three gospels offer a body of sayings on the whole so consistent, so coherent, and withal so distinctive in manner, style, and content that no reasonable critic should doubt, whatever reservations he may have about individual sayings, that we find reflected here the thought of a single, unique teacher."¹⁴ We shall see that our evidence confirms Dodd's claim.

¹³ George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans, 1913), p. 44.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 21–2. Similarly, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 10–21.