STUDIES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Jesus and After

The First Eighty Years



E Bruce Brooks

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Studies in Early Christianity

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The cover illustration is a detail from “Jesus Preaches in a Ship” by James Tissot (circa 1890), courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

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To

Claude Goldsmid Montefiore

6 June 1858 – 9 July 1938

Preface

This book is not a History of Early Christianity. It rests on a careful philological analysis of the texts, and by highlights from those texts, it seeks to give a *sense* of that history by listening in on the early Jesus followers and their opponents. Those who followed Jesus' teachings during his lifetime and after, I call the Alpha Christians.

Later arose doctrines (the Resurrection and the Atonement) based on Jesus' death as *itself* having power to save. These ideas found a hearing among the Beta Christians; theirs is the Christianity of Paul. Alpha and Beta were hateful to each other, and both were hateful to Temple Judaism. This book introduces Alpha, then Beta, then watches as that three-way opposition plays itself out. Only brief space is given to a more individual or Gnostic variant, where people are saved by gaining knowledge of their own divine origin; it might be called Gamma Christianity.

These texts are often read as having the same message, as though they all came from the same moment in time. This book looks instead for the history connecting them, the evolution and sometimes the conflict of ideas that link one text to another, and ultimately to ourselves, in the present century. There is also history *within* some of the texts, as later material was added to keep that text current with the latest thinking about Jesus. That is where the philological analysis comes in: to identify those additions. This is not especially difficult. Here is Jesus in Mark, predicting that his followers will soon abandon him:

> Mark 14:27. And Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall fall away, for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered abroad.
>
> [28] *Howbeit, after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee.*
>
> [29] But Peter said unto him, Although all shall fall away, yet will not I.

Peter looks right past the encouraging reassurance of verse 28, and responds instead to the challenge in verse 27. Then when Mark 14:29 was first written, Mark 14:28 *was not yet there*. This is how we recognize interpolations. And this interpolation is part of how we know that the doctrine of the Resurrection was not originally part of Mark's story of Jesus. In this way, it is possible to put the growth texts back to their original state. But identifying interpolations arouses opposition, and progress has thus been slow. Picking up on some results of previous scholarship, I have tried to continue that task for the texts here included (see further the footnotes and the list of Works Cited, page 185). For a text in both its original and its expanded form, see Chapters 52 and 53.

This book takes a historical view. Its Jesus is a human Jesus. He makes mistakes. His later followers also make mistakes. The Temple priests, turning away from what was widest in their own tradition, make their mistakes too. Some have found it helpful, and even liberating (not every churchgoer is comfortable with some Church doctrines) to have these changes traced out.

This book is for them.

Each chapter centers on a passage from the Bible or the related literature; it has an introduction (to identify the text, when it may not be widely familiar) and concluding Reflections. Readers are welcome to do their own reflecting; the book might provide material for an informal discussion group.

No apology for the Chinese characters which appear on a couple of pages. These people lived in a much wider world than we are accustomed to imagine.

My sense of the Gospels is that Mark was begun soon after Jesus' death, and updated well into the Forties. Matthew and Luke appeared in the Sixties, after the deaths of the leading Apostles. John came last of all, in the Eighties. The Gospels thus reflect three generations in the early history of Christianity. For these and other texts and events, see the Chronology on page 183.

What we call "texts" were more intensely regarded in ancient times. They were persuasions, as when someone is telling people what to do, in a sermon or an exposition. Or they were affirmations, as when people repeat something they already believe, and thereby strengthen themselves in that belief. The prayer Maranatha (Aramaic for "Come, Lord") is a wish that the Last Day should come *now*. When a singer finishes a hymn, and the hearers respond with "Hallelujah" ("Praise Jehovah") they are uniting with what has just been sung. I have tried to preserve something of that immediacy in these pages.

I have used the grammatically accurate American Standard Version (ASV), adjusting it where its archaism may mislead. One of its virtues is that it retains the historical present verbs which add so much vividness to Mark's story.

Readers with a Jewish perspective will note, perhaps with sadness, that with just a few differences in the direction it took, the Jesus movement might have remained what it was when it began: a Jewish sect. But a *universal* Jewish sect, attracting adherents from without as well as within the parent religion.

Some early readers, those with missionary experience, have noted a certain missionary quality in this book. The book more or less wrote itself when I wasn't looking, but yeah, I suppose so. It goes beyond noting what happened, and prefers some things to others. It points out a very early form of belief which did not remain dominant, but may have its appeal for some today.

Claude G Montefiore, the most interesting of Jewish commentators on the Christian texts, did somewhat the same thing. His idea of Liberal Judaism included some preferences that readers of this book will recognize. Our views of the mistakes of Christianity and Judaism are not identical, but they run in similar directions, and I have thus felt it right to recognize him as a precursor. This book is dedicated to him.

E Bruce Brooks

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Alpha

1. The Promise to David

2 Samuel 7:8-17, 27-29

David was not the first King of Israel; that was Saul. He was not the most renowned; that was David's son, Solomon. David himself was known to later ages as a precocious warrior, a chivalrous opponent, and a singer of Psalms. From later ages comes this Promise of God to David, dictated to Nathan and relayed by him, and then the response of David, as he becomes a King, accepting the promise and sealing the covenant with God. God is speaking:

Now therefore thus shalt thou say unto my servant David, "Thus saith Jehovah of hosts. I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, that thou shouldest be prince over my people, over Israel; and I have been with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies from before thee; and I will make thee a great name, like unto the name of the great ones that are in the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be moved no more, neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as at the first, and as from the day that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and I will cause thee to rest from all thine enemies. Moreover Jehovah telleth thee that Jehovah will make thee a house."

"When thy days are fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, that shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son; if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men, but my lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee; thy throne shall be established for ever." According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David . . .

[David prays to God]: "For thou, O Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, I will build thee a house, therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee. And now, O Lord Jehovah, thou art God, and thy words are truth, and thou hast promised this good thing unto thy servant; now therefore let it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee, for thou, O Lord Jehovah, hast spoken it, and with thy blessing, let the house of thy servant be blessed for ever."

Reflections

Thus was the covenant made. In later times, the line of David in fact ceased to rule, and Israel went into exile. But the promise of God was not forgotten. Israel sought to answer the riddle of why God had departed from it, and assured itself that if only things could be made right between God and Israel, God would return, and keep his promise. A later prophet, Malachi, added this detail, this further promise, for a waiting Israel:

> Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his Temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire, behold, he cometh, saith Jehovah of Hosts. (Malachi 3:1)

That Jehovah, when he did return to Israel, would appear in the Temple, was only natural; the Temple was the proper abode of God, and it was there that sacrifices were unceasingly offered to him.

And so Israel awaited the appearance of the Lord of Hosts –

> Thus saith the Lord, Jehovah of Hosts, O my people that dwellest in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrian, though he smite thee with the rod, and lift up his staff against thee, after the manner of Egypt. For yet a very little while, and the indignation shall be accomplished, and mine anger to his destruction . . . And it shall come to pass in that day that the burden shall depart from thy shoulder . . . (Isaiah 10:24-27)
>
> Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his Kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever. (Isaiah 9:7)

Jehovah's hosts will drive out the Romans, and make Israel under the Messiah, as it had been once before under David, a great nation again.

Who would that Messiah be?

2. The Coming of John

Luke 1:65-79

John, the son of a Temple priest, was schooled in the cult of priestly purity. For him, the condition for Israel's return to God's favor was full observance of those prescriptions. When John appeared, he called for repentance, and many came to be baptized by him. Is John then the saviour of Israel? Precisely this had been prophesied of him, at his birth. The later writer Luke, who was seemingly close to the Baptist group, repeats that prophecy in this way:

And fear came on all that dwelt round about them, and all these sayings were noised abroad through all the hill country of Judaea. And all that heard them laid them up in their heart, saying, What then shall this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
for he hath visited and wrought redemption for his people,
And raised up a horn of salvation for us,
in the house of his servant David.
As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets
that have been from of old,
Salvation from our enemies,
and from the hand of all that hate us.
To show mercy toward our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant.
The oath which he sware unto Abraham our father,
to grant unto us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
Should serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
Yea, and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High,
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
in the remission of their sins.
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the dayspring from on high shall visit us,
To shine upon them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Reflections

Here, surely, is the Messiah long awaited. In ritual terms, John was the purest of the pure. His food and clothing were gathered straight from nature:

> And John was clothed with camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins, and did eat locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1:6)

Boldly did John preach against the defilement of the Roman presence, including the wrongs of their puppet ruler Herod, who had put away one wife and married another; a most conspicuous sin. And Herod, hearing of this, arrested John and put him to death.

The death of John was explained by his sect as due, not to any indiscretion, but to feminine intrigue. Mark's account, an early interpolation and the most sensationalistic thing in his Gospel, may well have come from the John sect. John Mark of Jerusalem was well placed to have observed John at first hand and to be in touch with his followers. Here, then, is how the John sect had probably told the story of John's death – in such a way as to exculpate John. Herod has heard of the miraculous deeds of Jesus, and reacts in this way:

> But Herod, when he heard thereof, said, John whom I beheaded, he is risen. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. And Herodias set herself against him, and desired to kill him; and she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was much perplexed, and he heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, and the high captains, and the chief men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and them that sat at meat with him; and the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went out and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptizer . . . And the king was exceeding sorry, but for the sake of his oaths, and of them that sat at meat, he would not reject her. And straightway the king sent forth a soldier of his guard, and commanded to bring his head; and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother.
>
> And when his disciples heard thereof, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:16-29)

The role which John had sought to fill, as the heir of God's promise to David, was now open for another candidate. In the light of John's failure, that candidate would have to rethink the whole proposition. What did God want? What was available in Scripture to guide the movement?

3. The Duty of Man

Numbers 31:7, Joshua 6:20-21, Micah 6:6-8

In the old view, God was tribal, and gave Israel victory in war:

> And they warred against Midian, as Jehovah had commanded Moses, and they slew every male. (Numbers 31:7)
>
> So the people shouted, and blew the trumpets; and it came to pass . . . that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both old and young, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. (Joshua 6:20-21)

But time passed, and ideas changed. In the later Book of the Prophet Micah, after a passage in which God recounts all that he has accomplished for Israel, there suddenly occurs this passage, not spoken by God:

> Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah,
> and bow myself before the high God?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
> Will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousand rivers of oil?
> Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
> the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
> He hath showed thee, O man, what is good,
> and what doth Jehovah require of thee,
> But to do justly, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:6-8)

Reflections

This is one of three passages in the Scriptures where the sacrificial tradition is rejected in favor of an ethical idea of the duty of man. All are interpolations, and we do not know who wrote them, or when. Here are the other two:

> What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith Jehovah.
> I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts,
> and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats.
> When ye come to appear before me,
> who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts?
> Bring no more vain oblations: incense is an abomination unto me.
> New moon and Sabbath; the calling of assemblies –
> I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting
> Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth;
> They are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them.
> And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you;
> Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear:
> your hands are full of blood.
> Wash you, make you clean,
> put away the evil of your doings from you.
> Learn to do well:
> seek justice, relieve the oppressed,
> judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

And:

> I hate, I despise, your feasts,
> And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
> Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings,
> I will not accept them,
> Neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts.
> Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs,
> For I will not hear the melody of thy viols.
> But let justice roll down as waters,
> And righteousness as a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

In the long war between the priestly and the human understanding of life, which has been fought out on many a continent and in many a sacred writing, here is one climactic Palestinian moment.

John's disciple Jesus, thinking on these prophecies, and on John's failure, will have understood why the sacrificial piety preached by John had been wrong, and why John himself had been executed. The whole basis was faulty. The ritual laws were not only beside the point, *they were not the point at all.* Something entirely different was needed.

The contribution of Jesus was to remember what that different thing was.