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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Invitation to Contribute Articles

With this issue the first two volumes of JSHJ have been completed. The response has, frankly, been overwhelming. The first volume sold out, was reprinted, and it has also sold out. Clearly the journal addresses an interest and meets a need. On behalf of the editorial board and the publisher, who have believed in this project from the beginning, I wish to thank you, our readers and subscribers.

We need, however, an increase in high-quality contributions to continue developing the journal and to maintain the level of academic excellence shown in these first two volumes. And so I wish to encourage those with the expertise to contribute an article for consideration. While a majority of the articles will continue the focus on traditional historical Jesus studies, the vision for the journal is broader than this. I would encourage readers to consult my inaugural article, ‘On Finding a Home for Historical Jesus Discussion: An Invitation to the Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus’, JSHJ 1.1 (2003), pp. 3-5, for a description of the variety of themes that the journal encourages (this article may also be downloaded from the journal’s website: www.continuumjournals.com/jshj).

One clarification should perhaps be made. Many of the articles published thus far have argued that a particular pericope or tradition is probably historical and then proceeded to show the implications this has for understanding the figure of Jesus. While such articles are the bread and butter of this journal’s focus, it would be equally valid to have articles that argue that a particular pericope or tradition commonly used in historical reconstructions of Jesus has a provenance other than the historical Jesus, and thus should not be used in historical reconstructions of Jesus. This type of argument also makes a contribution to this discipline, and such articles would be equally considered for publication.

Please consult the ‘Guidelines for Contributors’ on the last page of this issue for further instructions.
Introduction to this Issue

This issue contains a most interesting mix of articles and is evidence of the breadth and depth that this journal’s focus can provide.

The first article is from Michael F. Bird, a PhD candidate in New Testament at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. His article explores the most appropriate context for understanding Jesus’ woe in Matthew 23.15, which describes the Pharisees as those who ‘…cross sea and land to make a single convert…’ While this text is frequently used as evidence for Jewish proselytizing activity amongst Gentiles, this article argues against this interpretation and comes to quite a different conclusion.

The second article, by James G. Crossley, of the Department of Theology at the University of Nottingham, considers the term ‘repentance’ in the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus. A careful consideration of the term’s Semitic context contributes to a better understanding of this important term.

The third article is by Donald Capps, the William Harte Felmeth Professor of Pastoral Psychology at Princeton Theological Seminary. This article encourages us to ‘think outside the box’. By someone beyond the traditional guild of historical Jesus scholars, it invites us to reconsider the traditional rejection of psychological studies with respect to Jesus as it explores the role of ‘power tactician’.

One of the areas of interest for *JSHJ* is the interpretation of Jesus in art. The final four essays consider Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Alan F. Segal of Barnard College, Columbia University and Rikk Watts of Regent College, Vancouver, two scholars with different backgrounds and very different interpretations of the movie, were invited to review the movie and then respond to each other’s review. Their engagement with the movie and interaction with each other should enhance our own understanding and response to it.

Robert L. Webb
Executive Editor, *JSHJ*
THE CASE OF THE PROSYLYTIZING PHARISEES?—MATTHEW 23.15

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Matthew 23.15 in the context of the debate concerning pre-Christian Jewish proselytizing activity amongst Gentiles. The study assesses the historical authenticity of the logion and examines the various positions for understanding its meaning. It then attempts to argue that Matthew 23.15 is an authentic saying of Jesus aimed at censuring a Pharisaic group for endeavouring to recruit Gentile adherents (God-fearers) to the cause of Jewish resistance against Rome. It concludes that the logion does not constitute evidence for the existence of a Jewish proselytizing mission.

Key Words: proselyte, proselytizing, Matthew 23.15, Pharisees

In recent times there has been a shift in the way that Jewish missionary activity in Second-Temple Judaism has been viewed.1 Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was common to argue that Judaism was indeed a missionary religion, and this view found notable expression in the works of Adolf von Harnack and Emil Schürer.2 The position was reinforced by several Jewish scholars including G.F. Moore, B.J. Bamberger, W.G. Braude and S. Sandmel.3 This perspective

was virtually canonized with Karl Kuhn’s article in *TDNT* and A.D. Nock’s early work on conversion,⁴ and despite occasional dissenters,⁵ it remained basically unchallenged so that Jeremias could state, ‘Jesus thus came on the scene in the midst of what was *par excellence* the missionary age of Jewish history’.⁶ However, in the last twenty years this consensus has been contested and is arguably in the process of being overturned.⁷ Consequently there has been an abundance of publications on this topic that have endeavoured to either defend⁸ or

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reject\(^9\) the notion of a pre-Christian Jewish mission to Gentiles. A passage critical to the discussion, either for or against Jewish missionary activity, is Mt. 23.15:

\[
\text{Οὐὰι δὲ ὑμῖν, γραμματεῖς καὶ φαρισαῖοι ὑποκριταὶ, ὅτι περιάγετε τὴν ἀλάσσαν καὶ τὴν ἕξην ποιῆσαι ἕνα προσήλυτον, καὶ ὅταν γενήσετε ποιεῖτε αὐτὸν ὑόν γεέννης διπλότερον ὑμῶν.}
\]

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make him become twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

The logion is the second of seven woe oracles in Mt. 23.13-36 which denounce the scribes and Pharisees. The problem is that the meaning of this utterance is highly disputed; in particular, the uncertainty as to whether it constitutes legitimate evidence for Jewish proselytism in the first century. Furthermore, its relationship to Matthew’s community appears complex as is the question of its historical authenticity. In view of this, it will be the aim of this article to examine Mt. 23.15 in order to identify its meaning, its relationship to the historical Jesus, and its significance for the debate concerning Jewish missionary activity.

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Authenticity

A matter determinative for any solution is whether the logion is authentic and goes back to Jesus or else represents a creation by the early church. In a Sitz im Leben Jesu the saying potentially reflects Jesus’ competition with the Pharisees in proposing an alternative agenda for Israel, set over and against the Pharisees’ programme of national restoration through a regime of strict Torah observance. Conversely, it is genuinely possible that the verse reflects the response of Matthew’s community towards judaizing Christians. Likewise, it may mirror a post-70 CE Jewish counter mission in their vicinity or else echo the hostile response that Christian missionaries received from Gentile converts to Judaism concerning their Torah-free gospel. In seeking a solution, several Mattheanisms are detectable in the coupling of γραμματεῖς καὶ φαρισαίοι (‘scribes and Pharisees’) as well as ἕνα (‘even one’). The framing of the saying in a woe oracle may also be redactional. Apart from this, the logion does not display typical Matthean features and the words ἡγραφαὶ (‘land’) and προσήλυτον (‘convert’) have their only occurrence in Matthew’s Gospel here. There are also several indices which point towards its probable authenticity.

(1) There is possibly an Aramaic source underlying the logion. Jeremias argued for the presence of several semitisms, but the only certainties are τὰν θάλασσαν καὶ τὰν ἡγραφαὶ (‘sea and land’) and γεὴν (‘hell’). According to Riesner, if Jesus said in Aramaic אֲדַמִּים, then a translation of ποιήσαι ἕνα προσήλυτον is not impossible.

(2) The case for authenticity is bolstered by juxtaposing the indices of plausibility of environment and embarrassment. A dispute between two Jewish groups competing for adherents is entirely conceivable in early first-century


12. Gen. 1.10; Jon. 1.9; Hag. 2.6; Josephus, Ant. 4.190; 11.53; Sib. Or. 3.271; 1 Macc. 8.23, 32.

13. Josh. 15.8; 18.16; 2 Kgs 23.10-14; 2 Chron. 28.3; 33.6; Jer. 7.31; 19.4-5; 32.35; Neh. 11.30; 4 Ezra 7.36; 2 Bar. 59.10; 85.13; Sib. Or. 1.103; 2.292; 4.186; Str-B, IV, pp. 1022-1118.

Palestine. The Pharisees propagated their halakhic interpretation of the Torah amongst the people,\textsuperscript{15} the Qumranites attracted initiates who joined them in their withdrawal from Jewish society,\textsuperscript{16} ascetic figures such as John the Baptist\textsuperscript{17} and Bannus\textsuperscript{18} also attracted followers, as did the popular prophets who often had revolutionary intentions,\textsuperscript{19} and Jesus in his movement called disciples.\textsuperscript{20} Whether converts were being actively solicited or simply gravitated towards a group, one could expect that competition for followers between such groups would be almost inevitable. Jesus may have been opposed by certain Pharisees and scribes not simply because of the content of his teaching but because of his popularity with the crowds at their expense.\textsuperscript{21} In John’s Gospel a group of the disciples belonging to John the Baptist complain to the Baptist that the crowds are now going over to Jesus to be baptized instead of coming to him (Jn 3.26).\textsuperscript{22} Rivalry of this kind could result in the denunciation of other competing groups. Some Jewish elements apparently rejected John’s baptism as testified by ‘L’ and Mark respectively.\textsuperscript{23} The sectarian at Qumran also attacked the Pharisees as ‘seekers after smooth things’,\textsuperscript{24} and John the Baptist, according to Q, labelled them a ‘brood of vipers’.\textsuperscript{25} This demonstrates that the vehement language in calling the proselyte a ‘son of hell’ is not necessarily the product of later Christian anti-Semitism projected back onto Jesus by the post-70 CE church, but may have been indicative of intra-Jewish factionalism and polemics.\textsuperscript{26} In Jesus’ environment, then, rivalry and rhetoric between himself and the Pharisees over converts would be entirely comprehensible as they vied for influence in their region.

Concurrently, such a derogatory remark about proselytes may have also been potentially embarrassing to the early Christian congregations where, according

\textsuperscript{15} Josephus, \textit{Life} 191; \textit{War} 2.162; \textit{Ant.} 13.288, 298, 401-406; 18.15, 17.
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. e.g. 1QS 1.16-26; 2.11-3.12; 6.13-23; CD 15.7-17.
\textsuperscript{17} Mk 1.4-8; Jn 1.19-28; Lk. 7.24/Mt. 11.7; Josephus, \textit{Ant.} 18.116-18.
\textsuperscript{18} Josephus, \textit{Life} 11–12.
\textsuperscript{19} Josephus, \textit{Ant.} 18.85-87 (Samaritan); 20.97-98 (Theudas); 20.169-72; \textit{War} 2.261-63; Acts 21.38 (the Egyptian); cf. \textit{War} 2.258-60; \textit{Ant.} 20.167-68.
\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Mk 11.18; 12.12; 15.10.
\textsuperscript{22} On the authenticity of the tradition that the ministries of Jesus and John overlapped where Jesus grew in popularity, see Rudolf Schnackenburg, \textit{The Gospel According to John} (3 vols.; New York: Herder & Herder, 1968–82), I, p. 411.
\textsuperscript{23} Lk. 7.30; Mk 11.30-33 (= Mt. 21.25-27; Lk. 20.4-8).
\textsuperscript{24} 1QH 10.14-16, 31-32; 12.9-11; 4Q169 2.2; 3.3-8.
\textsuperscript{25} Lk. 3.7-9/Mt. 3.7-10.
\textsuperscript{26} Cf. e.g. 1QS 2.5-10; CD 1.11-21; \textit{T. Mos.} 7.3, 9-10; \textit{Pss. Sol.} 4.1-8.
to Acts (2.11; 6.5; 10.2, 22, 35; 13.16, 26, 43, 50; 16.14; 17.4, 17; 18.7), many
of the initial Gentile believers came from proselyte or God-fearer ranks. That
the primitive church would invent such a negative charge against proselytes,
who possibly comprised a constituent element of its membership, is unlikely.
Furthermore, continuing competition and confrontation with other Jewish groups
in the post-Easter era could provide a plausible setting for preserving the utter-
ance within the early church. Lastly, there is nothing in the logion which demands
a post-70 CE context or is anachronistic in Jesus’ own life setting.

Thus, the logion fits into a Palestinian Jewish environment typified by some
degree of competition between various groups for the hearts and minds of
followers, but also grates against the situation of the early church that largely
embraced proselytes who may have even had a Pharisaic orientation at one time.

(3) There is a theological divergency from the overall pattern of Matthew’s
theology. The logion with its unflattering derision of proselytes (which in Mat-
thew’s context could readily be equated with converted Gentiles) deviates from
Matthew’s theological tendency which is to accentuate Jesus’ Jewish credentials
and the primacy of Israel in his mission, but to also demonstrate that the Gentiles
were included within the purview of his kingdom mission. Matthew arguably
takes his readers from (his perception of) Jewish exclusivism to a christocentric
universalism.27

Though the evidence for authenticity may not be decisive, the saying plausibly
stems from a Sitz im Leben Jesu but has been redacted to fit into contours of the
discourse of Mt. 23.13-36. Therefore, I side with Davies and Allison, McKnight
and Goodman who contend for a traditional saying framed by Matthew into its
present form.28 If so, Mt. 23.15 arguably reflects Jesus’ competition with the
Pharisees over a mission issue. However, the substance of this issue, as seen
below, is moot. The saying can be understood in three main ways.

Proselytizing of Gentiles by Pharisees

The first option sees it as a reference to the proselytizing of Gentiles by Phari-
sees.29 For many scholars a desire to win over Gentile converts is the plainest

28. Davies and Allison, Matthew, III, pp. 287-88; McKnight, A Light among the Gentiles,
Diaspora Setting, p. 39.
29. Jeremias, Jesus’ Promise to the Nations, pp. 18-19; H.J. Schoeps, Paul: The Theology
Schürer, The History of the Jewish People, III.1, p. 160; Flowers, ‘Matthew xxiii.15’, p. 69;
meaning of the saying and they are often perplexed as to how it can be understood in any other way. A proselyte was, ordinarily, a convert to Judaism. At the same time the word περιήγησα (‘cross’) does imply a sense of itinerancy and it is used in Mt. 4.23 and 9.35 for Jesus’ own mission activity. J.C. Paget thinks that the phrase ‘sea and land’ requires efforts to convert Gentiles to Judaism. By the same token, Davies and Allison caution that since the verse is filled with ‘hyperbolic invective’ it cannot be adduced as evidence of Jewish missionary activity. Moreover, trying to persuade a pagan to become a fully fledged Jew seems too much to ask in one exchange, particularly when conversions were predominantly gradual. This is reinforced by the story of the conversion of Izates in Adiabene and Juvenal’s son of a Sabbath-fearer who is eventually circumcised. Furthermore, Jewish Hellenistic propaganda literature was primarily geared towards convincing Jews that Judaism was on an equal footing with Hellenism and to refute anti-Semitic argumentation. Only secondarily did it address Gentiles, in


32. B. Šab. 31a.


which case such efforts at best might engender them with a positive disposition to Judaism, defend Judaism against criticism, exhort the brilliance of monotheism, the wisdom of Torah and demonstrate the superiority of the Jewish religion.\textsuperscript{36} Such arguments would not gain converts \textit{per se} (i.e. circumcised proselytes) as much as it might win over sympathizers. In separate instances when a sympathizer or God-fearer\textsuperscript{37} consented to circumcision and ‘joined the house of Israel’ (Jdt. 14.10) it was usually out of a conviction for a deeper level of commitment to Judaism. Circumcision was the \textit{sine qua non} of full conversion. The journey from pagan to proselyte (if free from duress) was a gradual process taking years or even a generation.

\textit{Intra-Jewish Proselytizing of Non-Pharisaic Jews}

A second alternative is that the logion \textit{signifies the efforts of Pharisees to convert other Jews to Pharisaism}.\textsuperscript{38} Goodman suggests that ‘Jesus (or Matthew) was attacking Pharisees for their eagerness in trying to persuade other Jews to follow Pharisaic halakah’.\textsuperscript{39} The verse implies that the convert became a Pharisee or at least adopted Pharisaic interpretation of the Torah. Although there is no corroborating evidence that Pharisees tried to convert other Jews to their sect, it is at


\textsuperscript{37} I recognize that, mainly due to the work of A.T. Kraabel, the existence of a homogenous group of Gentile sympathizers-adherents known as ‘God-fearers’ in Acts has been largely questioned. Be that as it may, a recent trend in scholarship has been to assert that there is reasonable (though not completely unambiguous) evidence from literary, archaeological and epigraphical sources for the association of Gentiles with variegated levels of attachment to Jewish communities who could also be designated with the equivocal term ‘God-worshippers’ or even ‘God-fearers’ as found in Acts. See J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, \textit{Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary} (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987), p. 65; Schürer, \textit{The History of the Jewish People}, III.1, p. 168; J.M.G. Barclay, \textit{Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan} (323 BCE–117 CE) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 279; Levinskaya, \textit{The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting}, pp. 51-126.


\textsuperscript{39} Goodman, \textit{Mission and Conversion}, p. 70.
least plausible. Their interpretation of Torah attracted pupils and they may have aimed at propagating their views to a wider audience. Additionally, another Judean group, the members of the Qumran sect, being celibate, may have undertaken missionary activity in order to survive.40 Goodman concedes that in the Septuagint προσήλυτος (translating Heb.ગ [gēr]) nearly always means a Gentile convert. However, the term is exceedingly rare and in some instances it can mean ‘resident alien’ (e.g. Lev. 19.10; 24.16)41 or in Exod. 22.20, Lev. 19.34 and Deut. 10.19 προσήλυτος is used to refer not to Gentiles but to the Israelites in Egypt. Goodman concludes that προσήλυτος had both a technical and non-technical meaning; the latter could be applied to Jews.42 Goodman’s thesis is hampered by the fact that προσήλυτος in the Septuagint,43 Jewish inscriptions,44 Philo45 and the New Testament46 is predominantly a technical term for Gentile converts to Judaism.47

Even so, there several other factors that do support Goodman’s interpretation: (1) In Sifra Kedoshim 8 it says, ‘The rabbis say: if a proselyte takes it upon himself to obey all the words of the Torah except one single commandment, he is not be received’ which could easily apply to Gentile converts to Judaism, and Jewish converts to Pharisaism.48 (2) If first-century Pharisaism is perceived fundamentally as a renewal movement within Israel, it becomes entirely plausible that the quest to propagate or implement their programme of renewal may take on a missionary character.49 James Dunn writes, ‘The otherwise surprising Mt. 23.15 suggests a history of some such sense of obligation on the part of some

43. Exod. 12.48-49; 20.10; 23.9, 12; Lev. 16.29; 17.3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15; 18.26; 19.10, 33, 34; 20.2; 22.18; 23.22; 24.16, 22; 25.47; Num. 9.14; 15.14, 16, 26, 29, 30; 19.10; 35.15; Deut. 1.16; 5.14; 10.18; 12.18; 14.29; 24.14, 17, 19; 26.11, 12; 27.19; 28.43; 29.11; 31.12; Josh. 20.9; 1 Chron. 22.2; 2 Chron. 2.16; 15.9; 30.25; Pss. 93.6; 145.9; Zech. 7.10; Mal. 3.5; Isa. 54.15; Jer. 7.6; Ezek. 14.7; 22.7, 29; 47.22, 23; Tob. 1.8.
45. Philo, *Somn. 2.273; Spec. Leg. 1.51, 308; Quaest. in Exod. 2.2.
46. Acts 2.11; 6.5; 13.43.
Pharisees to ensure an appropriate level of law observance on the part of those who claimed Israelite ancestry.\(^{50}\) (3) Justin Martyr in *Dial. Tryph.* 122.5 writes about τὸν χριστόν καὶ προσήλυτος σὺτοῦ (‘Christ and his proselytes’)\(^{51}\) giving προσήλυτος a meaning beyond conversion to Judaism. (4) Granted the overarching technical meaning of προσήλυτος, what other words for intra-Jewish sectarian conversion were available? A substantive participle of ἔπιστρέφω (‘turn around’) is possible as is Philo’s preferred ἐπιλύτος (‘incomers’) and cognates.\(^{52}\) The term νέοφυτος (‘neophyte’ = new convert to Christianity) was probably not in use yet; in any case προσήλυτος would convey a religious transformation more sharply.\(^{53}\) (5) The Qumranites apparently attracted fellow Jews to their community since in 1QS 5.6 and CD 4.11 there is a description of those who ‘join’ the Qumran sectarians and in 4Q266 frag. 5, 1.15 initiates are called the ‘converts of Israel’.\(^{54}\) Such an attraction is arguably confirmed by Josephus who, painting the Essenes as a philosophical school, writes, ‘Such are the theological views of the Essenes concerning the soul, whereby they irresistibly attract (ἀπόκτων δέλεορ) all who have once tasted their philosophy.’\(^{55}\) Paul’s own conversion is perhaps best understood as an intra-Jewish transference from Pharisaism to a messianic sect. Indeed, the continuing mission to the περιτομή (‘circumcision’)\(^{56}\) strongly suggests that the Christian movement began with intra-Jewish proselytization. (6) The phrase ‘sea and land’ is probably hyperbolic and does not necessitate a literal overseas journey; potential converts could be easily found in the Hellenistic cities in Galilee and the Decapolis. (7) If the logion is authentic, as argued above, then Pharisaic proselytization of fellow Jews becomes more credible.\(^{57}\)

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51. Cf. 28.2; keeping in mind also that proselyte can also describe converts to Judaism in *Dial. Tryph.* 23.3; 80.1; 122.1, 3-4; 123.1-2.


A third way of understanding the logion is that it denotes the attempt of Pharisees to turn God-fearers into proselytes. Scot McKnight thinks that the compounding of ποιήσαι (‘make’) and προσηλυτεύον (‘convert’) imply the total conversion and circumcision of a Gentile. The activity envisaged corresponds remarkably with that of Eleazar the Galilean (Ant. 20.43-47) who compelled King Izates to be circumcised after he had already consented to follow the Jewish law. This would make him βεβαίως Ιουδαίος (‘assuredly Jewish’). Thus the issue is making partial converts into full converts with extreme zeal for the Torah: ‘Torah proselytization’. On this perspective the emphasis falls upon transforming God-fearers into full proselytes through the ritual of circumcision. Yet there is no definitive proof that either circumcision or God-fearers are the activities or persons in question.

However, there is a variation of this view worth exploring that is wholly plausible in a Sitz im Leben Jesu, namely, that zealous Pharisees were indeed attempting to proselytize God-fearers, specifically, with a view to recruiting them to their nationalistic standpoint. I wish to submit several lines of evidence which support this position.

(1) Jacob Neusner has argued that the Pharisees ceased to be a political movement after the Hasmonean dynasty and they were consigned to political exile during the early Herodian period. It was during this time that they metamorphosized into a ‘table-fellowship’ movement that emphasized the emulation of priestly holiness. Despite the ingenuity of Neusner’s proposals, several problems arise: (i) The Pharisees were a politically motivated group in the

Hasmonean and early Herodian period and, as Neusner admits, deliberately sought power in the post-70 CE era. It seems unlikely then that in the intervening period they would be wholly apolitical given both their political origins and their eventual political domination. It is likewise improbable that the politically savvy Romans would empower a sectarian holiness club with oversight over the nation if the Pharisees were wholly devoid of political ambition and influence. (ii) One could hypothesize that the Pharisees’ political marginalization was translated in an attempt to renew and reform the whole of Israelite society. John P. Meier writes, ‘With no direct political power, the Pharisees had to seek levers of power by indirect means. They probably redoubled their efforts during this period to spread their influence among the common people, most of whom never became Pharisees themselves.’

(iii) Anthony J. Saldarini has argued that the Pharisees were part of the retainer class and firmly embedded within the political structure of Judean society. This is confirmed by the report that some Pharisees were also priests and some rose to prominent positions such as Gamaliel and possibly Nicodemus according to Christian tradition. (iv) Neusner deliberately downplays the role of the Pharisees in the war against Rome. Although Neusner is correct that some protagonists may not have been involved because they were Pharisees, but they were Pharisees who just happened to be involved, in any case one must reckon with the participation of Pharisees in the conflict which is hardly indicative of an exclusive concern for purity. Indeed some Pharisees were against the conflict as apparent from Josephus’s story where he, the chief priests and leading Pharisees met together in an attempt to prevent a confrontation with Rome. Alternatively, the delegation from Jerusalem sent to dismiss Josephus of the command of the Galilee consisted principally of Pharisees. Consequently, although the Pharisees, due to their political marginalization during direct Roman rule, became concerned largely with manufacturing the conditions necessary for eschatological restoration through a strict regime of Torah and purity observance, it would be grossly mistaken to conclude that they were therefore apolitical. In political terms they were the ‘powers-that-want-to-be’, and with such ambitions they were just as factitious as any other Jewish Palestinian grouping when it came to developing a

64. Neusner, From Politics to Piety, p. 149.
69. Neusner, From Politics to Piety, p. 48.
71. Josephus, Life 191-93, 197.
strategy as to how to achieve that. Evidently, some had nationalistic or militaristic leanings. A few examples suffice to demonstrate this: Josephus reports that around 6000 Pharisees refused to take an oath of loyalty to Caesar and Herod, resulting in severe reprisals. The uprising of 6 CE was instigated by the introduction of a census by Quirinius and led by Judas the Galilean and a Pharisee named Saddok; the former ‘threw himself into the cause of rebellion. They said that the assessment carried with it a status amounting to downright slavery, no less, and appealed to the nation to make a bid for independence’. This ‘fourth philosophy’ founded by Judas is said by Josephus to agree with ‘Pharisaic notions’. A prominent Pharisee, Simon b. Gamaliel, was an associate of John of Gischala, one of the factional leaders of the Jewish uprising. It appears that consenting or resorting to violence to eject the foreign oppressors may not have been out of the question for some quarters of Pharisaism.

(2) The word Ἰουδαίζειν (‘judaize’) can mean anything from full conversion to following certain Jewish customs (e.g. Gal. 2.14). Interestingly enough, this term carried significant political connotations. Josephus records that the Roman commander Metilius was saved from death when captured by ‘judaizing even to the point of circumcision’ (μέχρι περιτομῆς Ἰουδαίζειν ύποσχόμενον). The implication is that judaizing was a broad category but circumcision was the terminus of conversion. It seems implied that Mitellius was also offering to change sides in the conflict. In another incident, Josephus recounts how the Syrians contrived to ‘rid themselves of the Jews’ but had to be wary of the fact that ‘each city still had its Judaizers (Ἰουδαίζοντας)’ and juxtaposed with the ‘Jews’ it denotes some kind of Gentile attachment to Jewish practices and alliance to their political struggle in such a way as to be a significant stakeholder in any offensive against the Jewish population. Cohen points out that in the Acts of Pilate 2 the Roman procurator tells the Jews, ‘you know how my wife venerates god and judaizes rather much with you [sic]’. In such an instance, it can arguably mean that she supports the Jews in the political arena. According to Philo,

72. Josephus, Ant. 17.41-45; War 1.571-73.
73. Josephus, Ant. 18.1-10 (4); cf. War 2.56, 118.
74. Josephus, Ant. 18.23.
77. Josephus, War 2.454.
80. Cohen, ‘Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew’, p. 33.
those who convert have made their kinsfolk (συγγενείς) into mortal enemies (ἔχθροις ἁσωμβάτους).81 Juvenal remarks how the son of a God-fearer would ‘take to circumcision’ and ‘flout the laws of Rome’.82 Such negative attitudes facilitated a sense of hostility towards converts to Judaism, one that was potentially reciprocated by converts who took upon themselves the yoke of Jewish vilification. When one converted to Judaism, it was not merely a spiritual event but more akin to nationalization. Consequently, by converting to Judaism, one identified with and participated in the Jewish community and, to varying degrees, the Jewish struggle.

(3) Another factor to be considered is the participation of Gentile converts in the Jewish war against Rome. The Idumaeans who were forcibly converted by John Hyrcanus I83 in the second century BCE figured prominently in the revolt. On one occasion Josephus reports a contingent of 5000 Idumaeans actively participating in the revolt.84 The Idumaeans were specifically aligned with the Zealot faction during the rebellion.85 In addition, it is reported in a later rabbinic writing that some Idumaeans were even disciples of Shammai,86 who arguably influenced the zealous faction of the Pharisees. Josephus also records how, subsequent to the death of Herod the Great, many pilgrims from Galilee, Jericho, Idumaea and the Transjordan made an assault against the interim Roman ruler Sabinus in Jerusalem, with a significant engagement occurring in the Temple complex.87 Elsewhere Josephus tells of how foreigners (ζευόντες) were offering sacrifices in the Temple amidst a civil war being fought out in the Temple precincts.88 Their presence in Jerusalem at this time may have been indicative of their support for or even participation in the campaign against Rome. In another episode he reports how foreigners (ζευόντες) were employed as front-line troops by the Jewish insurgents at the fortress at Machaerus.89

81. Philo, Spec. Leg. 4.178.
85. Joseph, War 4.224-355; 5.248-50, 358. The majority of Idumaeans abandoned the Zealots later and departed from the city with two thousand citizens and returned home to Idumaea (War 4.353-54).
87. Josephus, Ant. 17.254-68.
88. Josephus, War 5.15.
89. Josephus, War 7.191.
The jewel in Josephus’ crown of conversions to Judaism is the house of Adiabene. Both Jacob Neusner and Lawrence H. Schiffman think the story of their conversion is accurate, at least in outline, as Josephus may have even been acquainted with the Adiabenian royal family during either their time in Jerusalem or after the war when some princes were taken to Rome as hostages. The Adiabenians may have wanted to foster an anti-Roman coalition in the region and in a post-Roman and post-Herodian Palestine possibly lay claim to the throne since they already ruled over Jewish subjects in the city of Nisibis. Hence, the conversion may have been just as much politically motivated as it was religious. Significantly, Josephus records how they provided support for the Jewish insurrectionists and even fought valiantly in the conflict. Neusner writes, ‘the Adiabenians not only encouraged the revolution of 66, but led the opening action against Cestius, which precipitated the complete break between Rome and Judea’.

Simon Ben Giora, in Josephus’ reckoning, was a ruthless and tyrannical figure and deeply involved in the Jewish revolt. His name in Aramaic means literally ‘son of a convert’. This is probably a reference to Simon’s proselyte origins. Hence, the argument so far should underscore that some of the most zealous Jews (i.e. those willing to use violence for the Jewish cause) were those who had recently converted to the Jewish fold.

(4) Jesus’ message was addressed, in part at least, to Israel’s increasing propensity for violence against Rome. Like Isaiah warning of the imminent confrontation with Assyria and Jeremiah with Babylon, Jesus stood before the Jewish nation urging them to forgo their nationalistic ambitions and aspirations

90. Josephus, Ant. 20.17-49; see also a rabbinic version of the conversion of Monbazus II and Izates in Bereshith Rabbah 46.11.
93. Josephus, War 2.520; 5.474.
95. See Josephus, War 2.521; 4.503-84.
of defeating Rome, and instead, to follow him as God’s final envoy to the struggling nation. Recently, Steven M. Bryan has objected to this perspective. Bryan argues that tax-collectors and the like would have little need of repenting of and thus abandoning revolutionary zeal.97 Bryan is correct, insofar as on the individual level such persons who were part of the domination system were unlikely to desire a significant re-ordering of power in the socio-economic or political sphere. Moreover, it is true that Jesus addressed specific individuals and laid upon them the strenuous demands of his kingdom agenda relevant to their peculiar circumstance. Yet on the national level, abandoning revolutionary zeal, among other things such as perversion of covenant justice and a failure to realize Israel’s divinely appointed vocation as a light to the nations, may well have been elements of his indictment against Israel corporately. It is, furthermore, a characteristic theme which I think makes better sense of Jesus’ action in the Temple in parabolically enacting the destruction of an apostate and obsolete institution for failing to draw the nations to Zion. Instead, when the nations came, it would not be with gifts and offerings, but with swords, soldiers and siege engines. What was meant to be a ‘house of prayer for all nations’ (Mk 11.17; Isa. 56.7), for some groups, had been transformed into a symbol of Jewish resistance to Rome and its rebuilding had served to only resurrect the fallacy of Zion’s invincibility.98

(5) It is true that Jesus here attacks not the act of proselytizing but rather the result. To some degree he chastises the Pharisees because the new proselyte imitates them and replicates their error and impiety. This seems to be Matthew’s understanding of the saying given its immediate literary situation.99 But is there more to it than that? Is there something else to what the proselyte becomes, ‘a son of hell’, that evokes Jesus’ response? We should ask exactly why Jesus is making such a strongly worded condemnation of the Pharisees if all they were doing was drawing Gentiles out of blatant immorality and idolatrous religion,

98. Ezekiel 38–39; Zech. 8.9-13; Sib. Or. 3.663-730 all discuss how God would defend the Temple/Jerusalem when attacked. The significance of the Temple as a symbol of resistance is underscored by several accounts reported in Josephus. First, he records how the insurrectionists would not cease fighting the Romans while the Temple was still standing (War 6.239). Second, following the fall of the Temple, the leaders of the revolt asked Titus to let them peacefully leave the city and to go out into the wilderness (War 6.323-26, 351). Third, Vespasian ordered the Jewish temple at Leontopolis to be shut down in order to prevent it becoming a new Jewish rally point (War 7.420-21, 33-35). In addition, Philo could refer to Jews who had zeal for the Temple (Leg. Gai. 212).
99. Garland (The Intention of Matthew 23, p. 131) writes, ‘Therefore, 23.15 condemns the proselytism of the scribes and Pharisees who make double the sons of Hell because of their false interpretation of the Law that denies Jesus as the Messiah and demands obedience to the ceremonial Law for salvation.’
encouraging God-fearers to make a deeper level of commitment, or else enlarging the Pharisaic party? Very few first-century Judeans would have rigorously objected to Gentiles or God-fearers becoming proselytes and joining the house of Israel. The Diaspora, to be sure, was another matter, where Hellenistic and Roman authorities looked upon the adoption of Jewish practices or conversion to Judaism with suspicion, disgust and contempt. There, one’s theology of conversion had to be constrained by socio-political realities. Thus some Jews seemed quite content for Gentiles to remain at a penultimate level of commitment as adherents or sympathizers (God-fearers or God-worshippers). Likewise, Jesus’ relationship with the Pharisees cannot be understood in entirely negative terms. Jesus was arguably closer to the Pharisees than any other Jewish party. He table-fellowshipped with Pharisees (Mk 7.1-15; Lk. 7.36-50; 11.37-41; 14.1-4; Jn 3.1-21), shared their belief in the resurrection, and perhaps his confrontation with them might even have been an intra-Pharisaic affair. If we assume that not all the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were utter hypocrites but some were genuinely devout and pious Jews who endeavoured to live life according to the Torah, hoped for the day of Israel’s restoration (however achieved) and looked forward to the renewal of all things, why might Jesus be condemning the result of their proselytizing escapade? It may be that the God-fearer adopts not only Pharisaic distinctions but inherited a nationalistic zeal for Israel’s liberation. Indeed, this is possibly embedded in the phrase ‘son of hell’ (tôi νυξερίης). In Matthew’s Gospel γέεννα (Aram. נָעַן [gēhimām]; Heb. שְׁמַיִם [gē-himmōm]; Lat. gehena) appears seven times (Mt. 5.22, 29, 30; 10.28; 18.9; 23.15, 33). The word denotes the ever-burning rubbish dump south-west of Jerusalem in the valley of Hinnom. According to Wright, Jesus’ warnings of judgment are not about the ‘end of the world’ but rather what will happen to Jerusalem if she keeps pursuing her idolatrous nationalism: she will be reduced to a rubbish heap. The viability of this interpretation depends exclusively on what one makes of gehenna in Jesus’ judgment oracles in view of its usage in the Old Testament and Second-Temple literature.

103. Cf. Mk 9.43, 45, 47; Lk. 12.5; Jas 3.6.
In the Old Testament geheena denotes the Valley of Hinnom which was the site for the worship of the Canaanite gods Molech and Baal and included ritual child sacrifice.\footnote{2 Kgs 16.3; 21.6; 2 Chron. 28.3; 33.6; Jer. 7.31; 19.4-5; 32.35; cf. Josh. 15.8; 18.16; 2 Kgs 23.10-14; Neh. 11.30.} However, by the first century geheena appears to have taken on a more universal and metaphorical significance in describing the place where the souls or reanimated bodies of all the wicked went for judgment.\footnote{Sib. Or. 1.100-103; 2.283-312; 4.179-91; 4 Ezra 7.26-38; Asc. Isa. 4.14-18.} This metaphorical dimension is retained in both the New Testament and in rabbinic writings.\footnote{E.g. m. Qid. 4.14; m. ‘Abot. 1.5; 5.19-20; b. Ros Haš. 16b-17a; b. Ber. 28b; see further references cited in SB, IV, pp. 1022-1118.} Duane Watson suggests the primary source of the idea of judgment at geheena derives from Jeremiah.\footnote{Duane F. Watson, ‘Geheena’, in David Noel Freedman (ed.), \textit{ABD} (ABRL; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), II, pp. 926-28 (927).} In Jeremiah it is the place of judgment for the Judeans who emulate pagan practices.

For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the LORD; they have set their abominations in the house that is called by my name, defiling it. And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away. And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste (Jer. 7.30-34, NRSV).

Therefore the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and all shall eat the flesh of their neighbors in the siege, and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them (Jer. 19.6-9, NRSV).

For Jeremiah, geheena will become ‘the valley of slaughter’ and it is the designated location for the judgment of Jerusalem when the hordes of Babylonians arrive to decimate the city for their unfaithfulness to God and their misplaced trust in their own political and military machinations. In Isa. 31.9 (MT and LXX; cf. 66.24) geheena will be the scene for the destruction of the forces opposing God’s people. Significantly, in Targ. Isa. 31.9 there is a tangible shift.
in that the ‘furnace of fire’ is also for apostate Jews: “His rulers shall pass away before terror, and his princes break up before the stand”, says the Lord, whose splendor is in Zion for those who perform his law, and whose burning furnace of fire is in Jerusalem for those who transgress his Memra’. The context revolves around not trusting in Egypt or military power, but instead relying upon the might of the Lord. Indeed, the threat of the furnace may relate back to Targ. Isa. 30.33 where the Assyrians are threatened with gehenna. Jews who trust in military power rather than the Lord may end up sharing the fate of Israel’s enemies. Similarly, in several apocalyptic writings, gehenna is the site of punishment for wicked Jews. In 1 Enoch the ‘abyss’ and the ‘accursed valley’ were assigned locations for unrighteous and wicked Jews on the day of judgment.109 This stands in contrast to the universalization of the metaphor as the fate for all the wicked, particularly in later rabbinic thinking, which supposed that most Jews would either be spared from gehenna or else Jews that did endure its consequences would do so only temporarily whilst the Gentiles would suffer eternally. In a tragic irony, the judgment Israel longed to fall upon the Gentiles would instead fall upon themselves. Thus, whereas contemporary interpretations of judgment believed that the Jews would not only escape gehenna, but it was to be the fate of Israel’s Gentile enemies, Jesus, in contrast, brings a divergent interpretation of Israel’s scriptures to bear against this through a synthesis of traditions found in Jeremiah and other literature where gehenna is the fate of the Jewish nation at the hands of a foreign power because it would not repent and follow God’s emissary to Israel. The subversive nature of the saying is highlighted further by the realization that in calling a proselyte a ‘son of hell’ (cf. b. Roš. Haš. 17b, ‘child of hell’; Jn 17.12, ‘son of perdition’) he was insinuating that the Pharisees, like their pupils, were destined for gehenna.

The vivid imagery evoked by gehenna may not have been exhausted by Jesus’ interpretation of it as referring to Israel’s fate at the hands of Rome. Nothing precludes an eschatological-metaphorical meaning concerning individuals in other contexts. This of course raises the question of the meaning of judgment in Jesus’ message and the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem and a further eschatological judgment (if any).110 Historically speaking, the idea of God judging Israel and Jerusalem, through a foreign invader, is frequent in Israel’s sacred traditions (e.g. Isa. 8.1-8; Jer. 20.4-6; Ezek. 17.12-15). By the same token the concept of a future eschatological judgment is at least embryonic in the Old Testament (e.g. Isa. 24.1-23; 66.16; Ezek. 37–38; Dan. 12.2) and was prevalent in Second-Temple literature (e.g. Sib. Or. 3.669-701; 1 Enoch 38.1-6; 27.1-5; 54.1-6; 90.26-27; 2 Bar. 59.5-12; 85.12-15).

109. 1 Enoch 27.1-5; 54.1-6; 90.26-27; 2 Bar. 59.5-12; 85.12-15.

110. See further, Bryan, Jesus and Israel’s Traditions of Judgment and Restoration; Marius Reiser, Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context (trans. L.M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
Yet I see no reason for drawing an either/or conclusion. Jesus may have spoken about judgment in manifold ways invoking various metaphors, images and historical examples. McKnight is probably correct to see the destruction of Jerusalem as inaugurating itself the final judgment.111

In sum, I have suggested that Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for judaizing a God-fearer with a view to indoctrinating him with nationalistic propaganda where, if he accedes and enacts such a perilous programme, the proselyte will share the fate of his mentor and burn like Jerusalem in the ashes of geheena in the aftermath of the terror wrought by the Roman legions. Geheena is the fate of Jerusalem as it is propelled imminently and tragically towards its bloody and fateful confrontation with Rome and it symbolizes the fate of the nation who will suffer the due consequence of their rejection of God’s anointed and his programme of national restoration.

(6) A last point to note is that Justin Martyr quotes Mt. 23.15 in Dial. Tryph. 122. There Justin reasons that the promise of Isa. 49.6, ‘I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth’, is not referring to strangers or proselytes as Trypho purportedly thinks, but to Christians. It is then that Justin makes his appeal to Mt. 23.15 as the Lord’s indictment of the Jewish people who, in this case, train their converts ‘to torture and put to death’ Christians. The stark contrast of Israel failing to recognize its vocational call as a light to the nations with the violent character of proselytes who imitate them agrees remarkably well with the line of argumentation I have outlined above. This is evidence that Mt. 23.15 could and was taken to refer to the violent acts performed by the proselytes of the Pharisees (and their rabbinic successors) implying that merely imitating the alleged Pharisaic hypocrisy was not the sum of its meaning.

Conclusion

The foregoing arguments have attempted to demonstrate, first, that Martin Goodman’s contention that Mt. 23.15 comprises a reference to intra-Jewish proselytizing of fellow Jews by the Pharisees is more credible than most have been willing to admit; and second, to advocate an alternative view whereby Mt. 23.15 signifies Pharisaic efforts at proselytizing Gentile sympathizers-adherents

111. McKnight, A New Vision for Israel, pp. 148-49. I concur with McKnight that Jesus’ oracles of judgment refer primarily to the fate of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple; however, elements of the Olivet Discourse (Mk 13) cannot be reduced whole scale to historical judgment on the Temple. It appears to be an incipient or protological action of divine wrath which, in some way, foreshadows or overtures the final recompense so frequently attested in Second-Temple literature and repeated throughout the New Testament. See also Craig A. Evans, Mark 8.27–16.20 (WBC, 34; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), pp. 292, 318-19, 328-29.
(God-fearers) not with a view to securing their eternal salvation, but instead to take up the Jewish cause by adopting the religious-political ideology of the zealous wing of the Pharisees. This later argument emerges from several aspects: (1) The moderate evidence for the authenticity of Mt. 23.15 and the plausibility of a *Sitz im Leben Jesu* for the logion. (2) the multivalent group known as the Pharisees did have definite political aspirations, often quite revolutionary in how they might be achieved. (3) the very notion of ‘judaizing’ can imply propagating and embracing a nationalistic viewpoint. (4) converts to Judaism frequently exhibited a violent zeal for Judea and Judaism and even participated in the Jewish revolt against Rome. (5) Jesus confronted the nationalistic aspirations of influential groups within Israel in his day and arguably synthesized traditions from Jeremiah and other literature in his warnings of *geheena* where it denotes the fate of Israel if she rejects his message and continued nurturing nationalistic ambitions. (6) Justin Martyr further attests an understanding of Mt. 23.15 as designating the violence rendered by the converts of the Pharisees rather than merely replicating their purported impiety.

Even so, both Goodman’s arguments and my own are admittedly contestable and not without problems (e.g. the lack of further evidence that Pharisees proselytized fellow Jews; the question of Jesus calling Israel to repent of nationalistic ambitions). However, I contend that they are just as plausible (if not more so) than the view that Mt. 23.15 denotes Jewish proselytizing-missionary efforts. Thus, I concur with Shaye Cohen, that despite being ‘the only ancient source that explicitly ascribes a missionary policy to a Jewish group’, Mt. 23.15 does not provide substantive evidence of Jewish proselytizing-missionary activity.112 Although Mt. 23.15 is only one fragment of evidence in the equation, nonetheless it appears to me that despite the fact that the first-century Christian mission was not without prior antecedents in Judaism, it constituted a new event.113 That carries several implications and raises further questions as A.T. Kraabel writes, ‘without a Jewish mission it will be necessary to find another explanation for the early, energetic and pervasive mission of the new religion. Is it one of the *nova* of Christianity which derive from the message of Jesus himself?’114 That is indeed the question.

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THE SEMITIC BACKGROUND TO REPENTANCE IN THE TEACHING OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

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ABSTRACT

It is thought that repentance in the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus is
grounded in the Semitic teshubah concept. The problem with this is that the LXX
largely uses ἐπιστρέφω for יָשָׁב whereas the gospels use μετανοέω which
usually translates יָשָׁב. This problem can be solved. יָשָׁב meaning repentance is not
attested in key documents. In contrast, words for repentance associated with יָשָׁב
are massively attested and it is probable that this was the language used by
John and Jesus. μετανοέω and μετάνοια are found in the gospels because they
are words which can be used for the conversion of gentiles. This was important
because יָשָׁב and ἐπιστρέφω are frequently used with reference to Jews re-
turning to God.

Key Words: historical Jesus, John the Baptist, repentance, Teshubah, Aramaic,
Semitic background

It is widely believed that the historical Jesus’ teaching on repentance is much
deeper than simply some kind of regret as the English, and indeed Greek, word
implies. Rather, the Semitic version of repentance is seen as the correct context.
As Geza Vermes put it:

In the Semitic mentality of Jesus the Jew, it [repentance] implied not a change of mind
as the metanoia of the Greek Gospels would suggest, but a complete reversal of
direction away from sin, in accordance with the biblical and post-biblical Hebrew dual
concept of ‘turning’, viz. ‘turning away from’ or ‘returning to’, conveyed by the verb
שׁוּב and the noun teshuvah.1

As we will see, this sort of approach makes good sense of the teachings of
the historical Jesus and also the historical John the Baptist.2 But the problem

2. On יָשָׁב and John the Baptist, see e.g. R.L. Webb, John the Baptist and Prophet: A
with this concerning the teaching of Jesus and John is well known: וַיִּשְׁכַּב occurs over 1000 times in the MT and is largely rendered with ἐπιστρέφω (ἀποστρέφω is also common) but never with μετανοεῖ, the very verb (with cognates) used in the synoptic gospels. This article will show that the historical John and the historical Jesus did indeed employ the Semitic concept of teshubah and that the problem of the unusual Greek translation in the gospels can be solved because the evangelists or earlier writers in Greek had one eye on the inclusion of gentiles in the Christian community.  

There are possible solutions to this problem already available. One would be to question whether the teshubah concept is in fact relevant. In the Anchor Bible Dictionary entry on repentance in the New Testament, A. Boyd-Luter raises the significant objection to using the בוש materia for understanding the New Testament concept of repentance:

In the LXX both metanoia/metanoeō and metamelomai translate the Heb nāham a total of 35 times, again emphasizing the elements of change of thinking and regret. It has been commonly held that the New Testament concept of ‘repentance’ follows the meaning of the frequent Heb verb šūb (TDNT 8.989; NIDNTT 1.357). However, such a view cannot be sustained from LXX usage because šūb, which is used over 1,059 times, is always translated by epistrephō (‘to turn, be converted’) and its kindred terminology (TDNT 8.726-29; NIDNTT 1.354).  

Yet this is a case where simple word correspondence between the MT and LXX can be misleading. The massively attested Jewish concept of repentance based on the Hebrew וַיִּשְׁכַּב (Aramaic: בַּשָּׁב or בַּשָּׁב) root is remarkably similar to the gospel material. John the Baptist’s call to repentance, for example, echoes ‘teshubah-repentance’ rather than simply a change of mind or regret associated with μετάνοια. It seems that it involved a complete change of practice in light


3. For the sake of convenience, I will now refer to the Greek translators of the Aramaic traditions as the gospel writers, even though these traditions may have been translated into Greek prior to the production of the gospels.


5. That the historical John preached ‘repentance’ in some way should not be doubted: it is certainly a pre-gospel tradition as it is independently attested, and indeed deeply embedded in the recorded teaching of John the Baptist (Mk 1.4/Lk. 3.3; Mt. 3.7-10/Lk. 3.7-9; Mt. 3.11; Lk. 3.10-14). Crucially, there is the embarrassing fact of Jesus being baptized for the forgiveness of sins which made the early church a little uncomfortable. So, for example, Matthew’s portrayal: John baptizes with/in water for repentance (3.11) and is made to question why Jesus even need undergo baptism (3.13-14). This strongly suggests that John’s baptism of repentance (e.g. Mk 1.4/Lk. 3.3; Mt. 3.11) is authentic. For a well-known version of this sort of argument see e.g. E.P. Sanders and M. Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels (Philadelphia: Trinity Press; London: SCM Press, 1989), pp. 312-13; E.P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM
of an imminent eschatological event according to the Q tradition (Mt. 3.8-10/Lk. 3.8-9; cf. Hos. 12.6):

Bear fruits worthy of repentance (ποιήσατε σὺν καρπὸν δέξιον τῆς μετανοίας). Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Luke 3.10-14 adds more details of what this practice entailed for John: sharing clothes and food with those who have none and not engaging in financial exploitation. There is a strong parallel to John’s teaching in Sirach 5.5-8 which, as might be expected, uses ἐπιστρέφω/βρέχω:

Do not say ‘His mercy is great, he will forgive the multitude of my sins’, for both mercy and wrath are with him, and his anger will rest on sinners. Do not delay to turn back/return (ἐπιστρέψαι/βρέξῃ) to the Lord, and do not postpone it from day to day; for suddenly the wrath of the Lord will come upon you, and at the time of punishment you will perish. Do not depend on dishonest wealth, for it will not benefit you on the day of calamity.

John’s general approach to repentance is carried on by the historical Jesus, even if there are differences over specifics, in that Jesus too believes that Jews should not simply show regret but show a total change of behaviour. In fact we get the following passage which provides a very similar approach to repentance to that attributed to John (Mt. 3.10/Lk. 3.9):

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other


6. Cf. D.C. Allison, ‘Jesus and the Covenant: A Response to E. P. Sanders’, JSNT 29 (1987), pp. 57-78. It has been denied, most famously in the seminal work of E. P. Sanders, that repentance was a significant theme in the historical Jesus’ teaching based on the meagre occurrences of μετανοέω and μετανοία in Mark and Matthew compared with their frequency in Luke. See Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, pp. 106-113; Sanders, Historical Figure, pp. 230-35. However, it has rightly been pointed out that the well-attested theme of repentance is crucial to the teaching of the historical Jesus and that this should not be ignored by over-emphasizing the (lack of) occurrences of the words for repentance. Significantly, the theme of repentance independently occurs in passages that assume the validity of Jewish institutions and practices in an uncontroversial and non-polemical way (e.g. Mk 1.40-45; Mt. 5.23; Lk. 19.1-9) and so reflecting what is at the very least an early tradition. For these and other criticisms of Sanders see e.g. Allison, ‘Jesus and the Covenant’, pp. 70-71; B.D. Chilton, ‘Jesus and the Repentance of E.P. Sanders’, TynBul 39 (1988), pp. 1-18; N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 246-58. This does not necessarily mean all the discussed passages here are authentic but, as will become clear, they are profoundly influenced by the Semitic view of teshubah.

Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent (μετανοησετε), you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent (μετανοησετε), you will all perish just as they did. Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I still find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down” ’ (Lk. 13.1-9; cf. Mt. 7.15-20).

The implication of bearing the fruits of repentance is a general view attributed to Jesus elsewhere in the synoptic tradition (e.g. Mk 9.42-48; 10.17-22; Mt. 7.13-14/Lk. 13.24). Similarly the parables of Luke 15 make excellent sense in the context of re-turn repentance, even though Luke uses μετανοέω and μετα-/νοια in the parables of the Lost Sheep (Lk. 15.3-7/Mt. 18.10-14) and the Lost Coin (Lk. 15.8-10). Here that which was lost re-turns to the fold, framed in the context of Jesus’ association with tax-collectors and sinners (Lk. 15.1-2). This imagery of sinners coming back is echoed in the following passage from Qumran where, as might be expected, ζωή is used:

Our God, hide your face from [our] sins, and] wipe out [all] our iniquities. And create a new spirit in us, and establish in us a faithful inclination, and for the sinners…and

7. See further the articles by Chilton and Allison in the previous note.
8. As the Parable of the Lost Sheep is from Q it is clear that at least one Luke 15 parable is an early tradition with some claim to historical accuracy. Despite the famous differences in the Matthean version (Mt. 18.10-14), the idea of that which was lost re-turning is still present. Sanders (Historical Figure, pp. 233-34), however, makes much of the differences: in Matthew the shepherd goes after the lost sheep, while in Luke the lost sheep must decide to come back. Matthew’s emphasis, he argues, is more consistent with the parable and reflects Jesus’ own view: ‘the emphasis falls entirely on God’s search, not on the sinner’s repentance. This is a parable of good news about God; it is not an illustration of the value of repentance’ (Historical Figure, p. 234). However, we should exercise caution in reading this parabolic language too literally. Compare Wright’s response to Sanders: ‘that is not how such parables work: The point of the parable in each case was to validate and vindicate Jesus’ own activity in taking the initiative and seeking out the lost’ (Victory, p. 254). Moreover, the teshubah ideal of repentance can cover both the sinner returning and another seeking out a sinner: there are passages such as 4Q393 1-2 ii, 4-7 which has a plea for sinners to be brought back to God; there are passages such as T. Abr. 10.14 [A] where it is the sinner who turns back and lives; and there are passages such as Ezek. 33.7-9, 11, 19 where both seeking out the sinner and the sinner turning back are present. Therefore the distinction between seeking out and returning may not be too significant. Consequently, even if Matthew reflects the earlier tradition, Luke is not so far removed from the line of thought found in Matthew. It is also worth pointing out that there should not be a problem with there being no discussion of a change of behaviour in passages such as Luke 15 as the Jesus traditions provide plenty of details concerning ethical behaviour and so we must assume that this was a guideline as to how the changed sinner ought to behave.
It is also worth speculating that the original language of the traditions associated with Luke 15 and Mt. 18.10-14 may be preserved in, or influenced, the New Testament epistles of James and 1 Peter. Compare the following:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back (ἐπιστρέφη) by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner (γινώσκετο ὃτι ἐπιστρέφος ἀμαρτωλόν) from wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5.19-20)

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (ἵτε γάρ ὄς πρόβατα πλανώμενοι, ἀλλὰ ἐπιστράφητε ὑν ἐπὶ τῶν ποιμένα καὶ ἐπισκόπων τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν). (1 Pet. 2.25)

It would appear, then, that word correspondence in the MT and LXX does not provide us with a simple solution in this case and that the ABD entry does not succeed in its rejection of the *teshubah* concept because re-turning to God is profoundly embedded in the gospel tradition. Another possible solution takes this point seriously. A *TDNT* entry on repentance by J. Behm provides more useful arguments concerning the specific problem of the use of μετανοεῖ and μετάνοια in the gospels:

In the extant fragments of later Gk. transl. of the OT there are clear traces of a complete equation of μετανοεῖ and ἴνα. In 6 cases where ἴνα means ‘to convert’ in the religious sense Σ transl. it by μετανοεῖ, Is. 31:6; 55:7; Jer. 18:8; Ez. 33:12; Hos. 11:5; Job 36:10 (LXX always has ἐπιστέφομαι or ἐπιστρέφω). The same is true of Ἀ (Σ?) at Ps. 7:12 and Ἑ’ Hos. 7:10… The linguistic material leads to the conclusion that for the Jewish Hellenistic world of the 2nd cent. A.D. μετανοεῖ was a common and even preferred equivalent of ἐπιστέφομαι = ἴνα, ‘to turn’, ‘to convert’.10

But a handful of occurrences of μετανοεῖ for ἴνα in Symmachus are not strong enough pieces of evidence to establish it as the potentially preferred equivalent in the second century CE. What about the continuing use of ἐπιστρέφω in the Second Temple period and beyond (see below)? Moreover, it is quite possible that Symmachus was influenced by the gospel usage. Behm’s argument remains useful as it shows μετανοεῖ was a potential alternative translation to ἐπιστρέφω but it cannot explain a blanket use of μετάνοια and μετανοεῖ in the synoptic gospels.

9. For rabbinic *teshubah* material (e.g. Deut. R. 2.24) similar to the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15.11-32), see E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 176-79. This, combined with the turning from non-kosher to kosher and Jewish behavioural assumptions in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (e.g. negative association with pigs, the joyous kosher meal) may point to an early intra-Jewish tradition that reflects the historical Jesus.

It is therefore necessary to establish the language used by the historical John and the historical Jesus concerning repentance and to provide an explanation of how this was later translated by the gospel writers and why in particular they found μετάνοια and μετανοέω attractive. This will first require a discussion of the relevant Semitic literature where the forms of בָּחַשׁ and מַחֲשָׁה occur. I will argue that, in addition to the arguments made above, it is possible to show beyond any reasonable doubt that some form of בָּחַשׁ was used by John and Jesus and that it is highly unlikely that מַחֲשָׁה would have been used. I will then move on to discuss Jewish literature in Greek to bring out the translation process from Aramaic source to Greek gospel, from בָּחַשׁ to μετανοέω/μετάνοια. I will argue that the language of re-turn was associated with Jews re-turning to God which does not necessarily include gentiles. This idea, I suggest, is found both in the Semitic tradition received by the gospel writers and in the broader Semitic context. The gospel writers needed more suitable words to deal with this tradition, not least because of a concern for the inclusion of gentiles in the Christian community, and so they chose μετάνοια and μετανοέω because they were words associated with the conversion of the gentiles and not wholly unrelated to the teshubah concept.

Semitic Background to Repentance in the Teaching of the Historical John and the Historical Jesus

Texts available in Hebrew and Aramaic are crucial for the teaching of the historical John and the historical Jesus for two major reasons. First, Aramaic was almost certainly the first language of John and Jesus.11 Second, Jewish scriptures in Hebrew may also have been known by John and Jesus.12 With reference to the present study, it might be added that the Hebrew בָּחַשׁ and the Aramaic בָּשׁ are virtually indistinguishable so there is justification in discussing them alongside one another. In this section I will show, through a discussion of the relevant literature in Hebrew and Aramaic, that בָּחַשׁ was widely available language for the teaching of John and Jesus and that מַחֲשָׁה was almost certainly not.

Masoretic Text
In the MT, בָּחַשׁ generally means something like ‘turn’, ‘return’, ‘turn back’ and the like.13 The general image of re-turning can be employed in a variety of
situations, including the frequent ‘secular’ uses of a person or animal physically turning or returning (e.g. Gen. 8.12; 21.32; 37.30; Exod. 4.20; Josh. 11.10; 1 Kgs 13.9; 2 Kgs 1.5) and ‘restore’ or ‘repay’ (e.g. Judg. 9.56-57; 2 Sam. 16.8, 12; 1 Kgs 2.32-33; 2 Kgs 5.10). However, the most important use for present purposes is the prophetic-style use of מנהר in the sense of repentance. Here, crucially, מנהר is used consistently and unambiguously of Israel (or Ephraim, Judah etc.) re-turning to God (or failing to do so), turning away from the sinful, indeed apostate, life and back to Yahweh (e.g. Deut. 4.30; 30.1-2; Isa. 31.6; 44.22; Jer. 3.10, 12, 14, 22; 4.1; 5.3; 8.4; 15.19; 24.7; 38[31].16; Hos. 2.7[9]; 3.5; 5.4; 6.1; 7.10; 14.2; Amos 4.6, 8, 9, 10, 11; Joel 2.12-14; Zech. 1.3; Mal. 3.7; Neh. 1.9).14 ḫב does not occur in the sense of repentance. But it is always used to denote ‘return’ in some form or other: to return home (1 Sam. 7.17); the ‘return’ of the year, i.e. spring (2 Sam. 11.1/1 Chron. 20.1; 1 Kgs 20.22, 26; 2 Chron. 36.10); and to answer (Job 21.34; 34.36). It is, therefore, of some importance for the New Testament material that מנהר is used in the sense of re-turn as opposed to simply turn.

The suggestion that מנהר is the most significant background for the synoptic tradition does have some support from the Hebrew Bible. In the MT מנהר (niphal) is used in the sense of relent or of a change of mind (e.g. Gen. 6.6-7; Jer. 4.28; 18.10; Amos 7.3, 6; Joel 2.13-14; Jon. 3.9-10; 4.2; Zech. 8.14) and, significantly, repent (Jer. 8.6; 38[31].19). Another important use of מנהר in the MT is with the meaning console or comfort (e.g. Gen. 37.35; 50.21; Isa. 40.1; 51.3, 12, 19; 61.2; 66.13).15

The MT then, as is widely recognized, certainly has a well-developed concept of repentance in the sense of Israelites re-turning to God based on the root מנהר, in addition to a more banal use of, for example, people physically re-turning. But while מנהר is the dominant word used for repentance, there is also מנהר. It is only when we get closer to the time of Jesus that the evidence in favour of מנהר and against מנהר becomes much stronger and it is that to which we must now turn.


15. For further references of מנהר see BDB, pp. 636-37.
Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature

The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and related literature known to us are important because they are largely written in Hebrew and Aramaic chronologically closest to the historical John and the historical Jesus. The potential significance of ובש/ובט and מַן in the DSS cannot therefore be underestimated for John and Jesus.

In the DSS the Hebrew and Aramaic מַן (and derivatives) occurs occasionally, mainly in the basic sense of ‘comfort’ or ‘console’ (e.g. 4Q260 5, 1; 4Q302 3 c, 1; 4Q428 8 i, 20; 4Q432 3, 3; 4Q434 2, 1-6; 4Q436 1 i, 1; 4Q437 2 i, 12; 11Q10 38, 6; 11Q13 2, 20) but I am unaware of it being used in the sense of repentance or related uses. In direct contrast, the Hebrew ובש and the Aramaic ובט are widely attested and are frequently used. ובש/ובט are used of re-turning in a basic, ‘secular’ way. So, for example, they can be used in the senses of answering (e.g. 4Q302 3 ii, 8; 4Q381 76-77, 9-10; 4Q382 21, 4; 4Q420 1 ii, 1; 4Q427 7 ii, 18-20; 4Q508 1, 3; 11Q10 9.2; 21.6; 25.5; 30.1; 34.3; 37.7), returning goods (e.g. 4Q267 9 vi, 3; 4Q270 2 ii, 10; 4Q270 7 i, 12; 4Q368 10 ii, 5; 4Q417 1 i, 22), and someone, something, or group turning, retreating, returning to previous places and so on (e.g. 4Q161 5-6, 2; 4Q248 8; 4Q252 1, 19-21; 4Q254a 3, 4-5; 4Q269 7, 2; 4Q272 1 i, 6a; 4Q405 20 ii-22, 9; 4Q491 1-3, 7; 4Q491 1-3, 15; 4Q491 1-3, 16; 4Q491 11 ii, 11; 4Q493 1, 10; 4Q504 1-2 v, 6; Gen. Apoc. 20.25, 30; 21.3, 19; 22.12, 29; 4Q204 4.6, 8; 4Q212 5.19; 11Q10 32.3, 33.4; cf. 4Q504 1-2 ii, 11; 4Q504 1-2 v, 6; Gen. Apoc. 22.24). More importantly for present purposes, it is used in the prophetic tradition of Israel or the ‘true’ Israel/remnant turning away from sin and turning or re-turning to the Torah, frequently with reference to the Qumran community (e.g. 1QS 3.1; 10.20; 4Q171 1, 3-10 iv, 24; 4Q171 1-2 ii, 3; 4Q171 11, 1; 4Q178 3, 3; 4Q256 9, 7; 4Q266 5 e, 15; 4Q266 8 i, 3/CD15.12; 4Q266 8 iii, 3/CD 10.3; 4Q266 11, 5; 4Q267 2, 11/CD 6.5; 4Q267 5 ii, 3; 4Q271 4 ii, 4/CD 16.1; 4Q271 4 ii, 6/CD 16.4; 4Q375 1 i, 2; 4Q398 14-17i, 7; 4Q398 11-13, 4; 4Q504 1-2 v, 13; cf. 1QS 7.17; 8.26; 4Q266 10 ii, 1; 4Q267 9 vi, 2, 5; 4Q270 7 i, 13-14; 4Q381 15, 1; 4Q400 1 i, 16; 4Q461 1, 9; 11Q13 2, 22). The following example is an eschatological application of the classic prophetic call to the sinful in Israel to re-turn to the way of righteousness:

‘And we are aware that part of the blessings and curses have occurred that are written in the ב[ook of Mos]es. And this is the end of days, when they will return (wbש/yב) in Israel to the Law… and not turn back (wbש/ו)… (4Q398 11-13, 3-5). Vitally for the study of Jesus and John, it is at Qumran where we get the earliest-known occurrence of ובש in a similar way to the rabbinic concept. The DSS are, therefore, similar to the Hebrew Bible in their use of ובש/ובט is massively attested suggesting that it was readily available

for John and Jesus to use. Moreover, it is consistently used in the sense of Jews re-turning to God, the general idea which appears to be present in the messages of John and Jesus. But there are also noticeable developments from the MT. For example, we get the earliest-known occurrence of יִרְכָּב in the DSS which means that it was certainly used at the time of John and Jesus. Perhaps the most significant development is that יִרְכָּב in the sense of changing mind, repenting, or regret is not, as far as I am aware, present. This raises the distinct possibility that יִרְכָּב was not a word available to John and Jesus. It could of course be that the developments in the DSS were particular to the Qumran group or that יִרְכָּב is coincidentally omitted at Qumran or that יִרְכָּב could have been present in undiscovered documents associated with the Qumran group. We therefore require further investigation by looking at other literature in Hebrew and Aramaic to see if these patterns are continued.

**Rabbinic Literature**

As with the DSS, יִרְכָּב (and derivatives) is not common and when it does occur it tends to be found in the sense of console, comfort, consolation and condolence (e.g. *m. Ber.* 2.7; *m. Sanh.* 2.1; *m. M. Qat.* 3.7; *m. Ab.* 4.18; *m. Mid.* 2.2; *Targ. Onq.* Gen. 5.29; 46.30; 50.21; *t. Sanh.* 4.1-2; 6.6; 8.3; *t. Suk.* 2.10; *t. Hul.* 2.24; *Targ. Neof.* Gen. 24.67; 37.35; 45.28; Num. 10.29; *Targ.* 2 Sam. 10.2-3; 23.1, 4; Isa. 54.10-11; 66.13; Ezek. 14.22; 31.16; 32.31). While יִרְכָּב does occur in the sense of regret, it is infrequent. 17 יִרְכָּב does occur in texts as late as the Midrashim based on relevant scriptural passages (e.g. *Gen. R.* 27.4; *Exod. R.* 45.1; *Num. R.* 23.8). But note that there are authorities such as R. Nehemiah in *Gen. R.* 27.4 who would rather translate יִרְכָּב in Gen. 6.6 (‘And the Lord was sorry [יִרְכָּב] that he had made humankind on the earth’) as ‘comfort’, in the sense that God was comforted that he had created people below rather than above for it would have incited rebellion in the heavens! In the Mishnah and Tosefta—important for present purposes because they are the earliest rabbinic collections in their final form and thus closest chronologically to the New Testament—I am unaware of any occurrences of יִרְכָּב or derivatives in the sense of repent, change of mind, remorse and so on. There is a significant use of יִרְכָּב translating יִרְכָּב in the Targumim which must be noted, not least because they reflect the language in which John the Baptist and Jesus spoke: when יִרְכָּב occurs in the MT in the sense of regret, changing mind, remorse and so on, the Targumim frequently alter the MT and often by using יִרְכָּב (e.g. *Targ. Ps.-J.* Gen. 6.6, 7; *Targ. Onq.*

Gen. 6.6, 7; Exod. 32.12, 14; Targ. Judg. 2.18; 1 Sam. 15.11, 35; 2 Sam. 24.16; Isa. 57.6; Amos 7.3, 6. As with the virtual absence of יִחַד in the sense of repentance, change of mind, regret and so on in the DSS, Mishnah and Tosefta, and combined with the images of return in the gospel traditions, this use of יִחַד in the Targumim further suggests that יִחַד was probably not the word for repentance underlying the traditions concerning John the Baptist and Jesus.

In rabbinic literature בָּשָׂר and derivatives are frequently used in the basic sense of return. So it can be used to describe a physical return (e.g. m. Yad. 4.4; m. Av. 4.19), restoring property (e.g. m. B. Qam. 5.7; m. B. Mes. 2.7; 3.6; 7.4; m. Shebu 6.1; m. Hor. 3.7; m. Kel. 27.12), and answering, responding or a rebuttal (e.g. m. Ber. 2.1; m. 'Abod. Zar. 3.4; m. Av. 2.14; 5.7; 6.6; m. Yeb. 8.3; m. Kel. 7.1; 13.7; m. Tef. Y. 4.6; m. Yad. 4.3; m. Ker. 3.9; Targ. Neof. Num. 22.8; Targ. Josh. 1.16; 7.20; Judg. 7.14; 1 Sam. 14.39; 2 Sam. 15.21; 1 Kgs 18.21; 2 Kgs 1.10; Isa. 14.10; 65.12; cf. m. Ber. 5.1; Targ. Neof. Gen. 37.14). It is also used in the ‘religious’ sense of repenting (e.g. m. Yom. 8.9; m. Av. 2.10; m. Git. 5.5). It is, of course, of course, הָבָשָׂר that is the most famous word used for repentance in rabbinic literature (e.g. m. Yom. 8.8; m. Av. 4.11, 17; m. Ned. 9.3; m. B. Mes. 4.10; y. Mak. 2.6, 31d; b. Yom. 86a-b; b. Pes. 54a-b; b. RHSh. 17b; b. Yeb. 105a; Targ. Neof. Gen. 6.3; 18.21). And when this, or any other derivative of בָּשָׂר, is used of repentance, it is almost always assumed that it is Jews re-turning to God. So, for example, m. Yom. 8.8-9:

Sin offering and the unconditional guilt-offering effect atonement; death and the Day of Atonement effect atonement if there is repentance (בָּשָׂר). Repentance (בָּשָׂר) effects atonement for lesser transgressions against both positive and negative commands in the law; while for graver transgressions it suspends punishment until the Day of Atonement comes and effects atonement. If a man said, ‘I will sin and repent (בָּשָׂר), and sin again and repent (בָּשָׂר), he will be given no chance to repent (בָּשָׂר)...’

The rabbinic evidence therefore contributes to an argument of collective weight. As with the DSS, יִחַד in the sense of repent, change mind, regret and so on is not present in early rabbinic texts. It does occur in other rabbinic literature,

18. Another word used for the Hebrew יִחַד is רשע, ‘regret’, ‘repent’ (e.g. Targ. Ps.-J. Exod. 32.12, 14; Targ. Neof. Gen. 6.6, 7; Exod. 32.12, 14; cf. Pesh. Gen. 6.6, 7). The fact that the parallel Aramaic texts use בָּשָׂר highlights the overlap between these similar words, just as has been argued for the other words discussed in this article.


20. See Montefiore, ‘Repentance’, pp. 250-52, for the rare discussions of gentiles in late rabbinic literature.
not least due to the scriptural usage, but there is good evidence that it was not
popular as there is a tendency to replace it with words deemed more suitable. As
with the DSS, the rabbinic literature vigorously continues the prophetic concept
of repentance which entails Jews re-turning to God and is focused on the verb
חזרה and the noun חזרה. Unlike מ跣 in the sense of repent, these
words are massively attested from earliest rabbinic literature onwards and this
contributes to the argument that they were certainly available for John and Jesus
to use. Moreover, the general usage of חזרה and חזרה in rabbinic lit-
erature clearly complements the idea of Jews returning to God in the traditions
associated with John and Jesus. It is noteworthy that חזרה is the domi-
nant noun for repentance, from the earliest rabbinic collections onwards, because
combined with the occurrence in the DSS and the clear echoes in the teachings
of John and Jesus it can probably be assumed that something like חזרה was the
Aramaic noun underlying the synoptic מטסנויה.

At this point it is worth briefly mentioning the Syriac translations of the
synoptic מטסנויה and מטסנויה, not least because they reflect the language in
which John and Jesus spoke. They consistently use some form of the root
בעת/באת. In fact מטסנויה is always rendered with סנונא/סונא. This is
presumably because, as we saw with the DSS and rabbinic literature, the idea of
repentance in the sense of מ跣 was not readily available and because the concept
of re-turning came naturally to a Semitic translator.21

There should be no doubt, therefore, that the teshubah concept is the correct
background for understanding the message of John and Jesus. הבשא, on the other
hand, is not. But this does not explain why the gospel writers used מטסנויה and
מטסנויה, known Greek translations of הבשא, and not ΕΙΣΤΡΟΦΗ and ΕΙΣ-
ΤΡΕΦΩ, the obvious words to translate באש and חזרה. It is to the
issue of the translation of the repentance traditions that we must now turn.

Jewish Literature in Greek and the Gospel Translations מטסנויה and
מטסנויה

To further aid our understanding of repentance in the Greek gospels, especially
the question of the seemingly unusual use of מטסנויה and מטסנויה, Jewish
literature in Greek is the obvious place to turn. Here the LXX is conventionally
seen as being important because it provides us with an example of how a
potential translator might act.

21. The anonymous reader of this article pointed out that Shem-Tob’s Hebrew Matthew
prefers the root הבשא when the Greek Matthew has מטסנויה and מטסנויה. Late
though this may be, it too suggests that a Semitic writer would be more comfortable with
teshubah repentance. I am grateful for this fascinating point.
As mentioned above, in the LXX ἐπιστρέφω (or related words) most frequently translates בָּאָשׁ in a wholly expected and uncontroversial way, namely in the general sense of something like ‘turn’, ‘return’, ‘turn back’ and the like, including the prophetic sense of Israel (or Ephraim, Judah etc.) re-turning to God (e.g. Deut. 4.30; 30.1-2; Isa. 31.6; 44.22; Jer. 3.10, 12, 14, 22; 4.1: 5.3; 8.4; 15.19; 24.7; 38[31].16; Hos. 2.7[9]; 3.5; 5.4; 6.1; 7.10; 14.2; Amos 4.6, 8, 9, 10, 11; Joel 2.12-14; Zech. 1.3; Mal. 3.7; Neh. 1.9).22 As noted above, בָּאָשׁ does not occur in the sense of repentance but it is used to denote ‘return’ in some way: to return home (1 Sam. 7.17); the ‘return’ of the year, i.e. spring (2 Sam. 11.1/1 Chron. 20.1; 1 Kgs 20.22, 26; 2 Chron. 36.10); and to answer (Job 21.34; 34.36). The LXX is not uniform in its translations and consequently not of much help for attempting to understand a potential gospel translation of an underlying בָּאָשׁ tradition. In fact a different Greek word is used every time to translate בָּאָשׁ, including ἐπιστρέφω (2 Sam. 11.1).23 Note also that ἐπιστροφή occurs five times in the LXX including the sense of a physical return, translating בָּאָשׁ (Judg. [B] 8.9; Ezek. 42.11), and ‘attention’ or ‘desire’ (Song 7.10[11] for הָאִישׁ, ‘longing’).24

As mentioned above, the LXX μετανοέω translates בָּאָשׁ (niphal) in the sense of relent or of a change of mind (e.g. Jer. 4.28; 18.10; Amos 7.3, 6; Joel 2.13-14; Jon. 3.9-10; 4.2; Zech. 8.14) and, significantly, ‘repent’ (Jer. 8.6; 38[31].19).25 In fact, when used in the sense of repentance, there are echoes of בָּאָשׁ/ἐπιστρέφω, thus making it possible for someone to use μετανοέω as a translation of הָאִישׁ/בָּאָשׁ.26 So, for example, Jer. 31[38].18-19:

Indeed I heard Ephraim pleading: ‘You disciplined me, and I took the discipline; I was like a calf untrained. Bring me back, let me come back, for you are the Lord my God. For after I had turned away I repented (MT: יָבָא; LXX: μετανόησα); and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was dismayed because I bore the disgrace of my youth’. (Cf. Isa. 46.8-9; Jer. 8.6; 18.8; Joel 2.14.)

24. E. Hatch and H.A. Redpath, A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 534, unusually give ἐπιστροφή for בָּאָשׁ in Ezek. 42.11. Muraoka, Hebrew/Aramaic Index, p. 90, puts ἐπιστροφή in double square brackets denoting Muraoka’s judgment that this is implausible (cf. p. 10). ἐπιστροφή also occurs in Ezek. 47.11 with no Hebrew equivalent.
25. There are other occurrences of בָּאָשׁ in the MT, including uses in the sense of repent, regret, change mind etc. (e.g. Gen. 6.6, 7; Exod. 32.12), and translated with a variety of Greek words, notably μεταμελέματα. For references see Muraoka, Hebrew/Aramaic Index, p. 95.
26. Behm, ‘μετανοέω, μετάνοια’, pp. 989-90. On p. 991 Behm also notes that Sir. 48.15 has μετανοέω for בָּאָשׁ and, as the Greek version also uses ἐπιστρέφω for בָּאָשׁ (5.7; 21.6; 48.10), it is further evidence of some overlap between ἐπιστρέφω and μετανοέω.
Unfortunately, μετάνοια does not have a direct Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent in the LXX. It is found once where the LXX adds it to Proverbs 14.15 and it is used in the sense of change of mind or reflection: ‘The simple believe everything, but the clever give time for a change of mind (ἐρχεται έις μετάνοιαν).’

To restate the basic issue, the LXX consistently uses εἰσπορεύομαι for בָּשָׁה and μετανοεῖ οὖν for בַּחִי and, if John and Jesus did indeed use some form of בָּשָׁה, this is of limited use in understanding the translations μετάνοια and μετανοεῖ in the synoptic gospels. Although the evidence is not strong, there are, however, some potential explanations based on a study of the LXX translations. For example, there is some overlap between בָּשָׁה/εἰσπορεύομαι and בַּחִי/μετανοεῖ thereby raising the possibility of translating בָּשָׁה with μετανοεῖ. There is, however, some further significant evidence in favour of the possibility of this translation in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

**Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha**

In the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature, εἰσπορεύομαι is used in a similar way to the LXX and would seem to be the obvious translation of בָּשָׁה for a Greek gospel. εἰσπορεύομαι can be used in the sense of a person physically turning around (e.g. Θ Sus. 47) and in the sense of to answer (e.g. Tob. 5.17[S]). It is commonly used to describe returning from some kind of journey, large or small, or in some related sense such as retreating (e.g. I En. 99.5; 107.3; T. Levi 17.10; T. Naph. 4.3; T. Zeb. 9.7; T. Benj. 12.4; T. Jos. 11.5; 13.3; Par. Jer. 3.10-11; 4.8; 7.27; Tob. 2.3, 5; 3.17; 6.13[S]; 10.1[S]; 1 Macc. 1.20; 3.33; 4.16, 24; 5.19, 54, 68; 7.25, 35; 9.9, 16, 50, 57; 10.55, 66, 87; 11.7, 51, 72-74; 12.24, 26, 35, 45, 51; 13.24; cf. Sir. 40.1; 1 Macc. 2.63; 3 Macc. 7.8). The prophetic sense of Israel re-turning to their God from sin is also continued in this literature (e.g. T. Iss. 6.3; T. Dan 5.9, 11; T. Abr. [B] 12.13; Tob. 13.6; Jdt. 5.19; Sir. 17.25; 21.6; cf. Sir. 5.7; 18.13; Wis. 16.7; 4 Macc. 13.5; cf. T. Benj. 5.1) or in the related sense of Israel returning to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem (e.g. Tob. 14.5-6). Some uses have interesting parallels to the teaching of Jesus, further suggesting that εἰσπορεύομαι might be the obvious translation in the gospels. So, for example, T. Abr. [A] 10.14:

For behold, Abraham has not sinned and he has no mercy on sinners (τούς ὁμορτωλοὺς). But I made the world, and I would not want to destroy any one of them; but I delay the death of the sinner (τοῦ ὁμορτωλοῦ) until he should convert (εἰσπορεύσαι) and live. (Cf. T. Abr. [B] 12.13.)

27. Behm (‘μετανοεῖ, μετάνοια’, p. 991) makes an important qualification: Symmachus Isa. 30.15 has μετάνοια for בָּשָׁה.

28. The view of Montefiore (‘Repentance’, p. 211) ‘that nothing of great importance about repentance can be obtained’ from this literature and that ‘its quality on the whole is poor’ is a little unfair as the following material shows.
There is even one rare use of ἐπιστρέφω with reference to the conversion of gentiles:

And thereafter the Lord himself will arise upon you, the light of righteousness with healing and compassion in his wings. He will liberate every captive of the sons of men from Beliar, and every spirit of error will be trampled down. He will turn all nations to being zealous for him (καὶ ἐπιστρέψει πάντα τὰ ἔθνη εἰς παραστέλλον σώτοι). (T. Zeb. 9.8)

Notable too is that ἐπιστροφή is also found in the sense of repentance, turning/re-turning to the Lord (e.g. Sir. 18.21; 49.2; Pss. Sol. 9.10; 16.11; cf. Ps. Sol. 7; Vit. Proph. 12.8; 16.1).

In many ways the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature uses μετανοέω in a fairly conventional manner. It is used in the sense of changing one’s mind (e.g. T. Abr. [A] 10.15) and, most importantly, repenting of sins, particularly in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (e.g. T. Reub. 1.9; 4.4; T. Zeb. 9.6-7; T. Gad 5.6; 6.3, 6; 7.5; T. Ash. 1.6; T. Jos. 6.6; T. Benj. 5.4; Gk Apoc. Ezra 2.25; T. Abr. [B] 12.13; Par. Jer. 8.9; Wis. 5.3; Sir. 17.24; 48.15; Pr. Man. 13). Similarly, μετάνοια is often used in the sense of repenting of sins (e.g. T. Reub. 2.1; T. Jud. 19.2; Jos. Asen. 16.14; Aristeas 188; Sib. Or. 4.168; Wis. 11.23; 12.10, 19; Pr. Man. 8; cf. Sir. 44.16).29 T. Gad 5.6-8, in a way which has some overlap with ἐπιστρέφω/ἐπιστροφή, conveniently spells out these uses of μετανοέω and μετάνοια with more substance after explaining the details of right and wrong:

I understood this at the last, after I had repented (μετὰ τὸ μετανοήσαί με) concerning Joseph, for according to God’s truth, repentance (μετάνοια) destroys disobedience, puts darkness to flight, illuminates the vision, furnishes knowledge for the soul, and guides the deliberative power to salvation. What it has not learned from human agency, it understands through repentance (μετανοίας).

But there is another similar and striking use of μετανοέω and μετάνοια which is of some importance for understanding the gospel translations, namely when they are used in the context of conversion of gentiles. Aseneth, in the conversion text par excellence, is said to have ‘wept with great and bitter weeping and repented (μετένει) of her gods whom she used to worship, and spawned all the idols’ (Jos. Asen. 9.2). Both μετανοέω and μετάνοια are flamboyantly used to describe the heavenly female figure of Repentance (μετάνοια) in an extremely positive sense concerning the conversion of gentiles (Jos. Asen. 15.7-10).30

29. For what it is worth, the heavily Christianized Apocalypse of Sedrach frequently uses μετανοέω (e.g. 12.4-5; 13.6; 14.8-9; 15.2) and μετάνοια (1; 12.4; 13.1; 14.2-3; 15.2) in the sense of repenting.

On the whole, then, the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature weighs in favour of ἐπιστρέφω as the Greek equivalent to בַּשַׁ. As with the LXX, it is used with the meaning of re-turning, including the prophetic sense of Jews re-turning to God. This literature is also consistent with the LXX in its use of μετανοέω and μετάνοια in that these words are used in the sense of regret, change of mind, repent and so on, echoing the Semitic מַנֵּ. However, analysis of this literature also raises further potential explanations of the gospel translation process. In addition to the overlap between ἐπιστρέφω/ἐπιστροφή and μετανοέω/μετάνοια, μετανοέω and μετάνοια can be used for the conversion of gentiles, something of obvious significance for gospel translations. Moreover, this kind of usage of the relevant words in Greek is also found in Philo.

Philo of Alexandria

In Philo’s works ἐπιστρέφω is used in a general ‘secular’ way to describe returning. It is used in the sense of turning attention to something or attraction (e.g. Poster. C. 106; Mut. Nom. 209; Flacc. 30; cf. Agr. 143; Jos. 230) and in the sense of physically turning around, retreating, returning from a journey and so on (e.g. Conf. Ling. 130; Migr. 195; Rer. Div. Her. 46; Fug. 124; Somn. 1.247; 2.144; Jos. 175, 200; Vit. Mos. 2.247; Praem. Poen. 95; Vit. Cont. 45; Leg. Gai. 272). It is also used with the meaning of a complete life change (Conf. Ling. 131; Fug. 142; Somn. 2.174-75). The following is a classic example of such ideas in the hands of Philo: ‘Then if you too, O soul, follow Leah’s example and turn away from mortal things, you will of necessity turn (ἐπιστρέψει) to the Incorruptible One, who will cause all the springs of mortal beauty to pour their streams upon you’ (Poster. C. 135).

Philo uses μετανοέω in the sense of changing one’s mind (e.g. Somn. 182; Vit. Mos. 1.167; Spec. Leg. 4.18; Virt. 208; Praem. Poen. 169; Leg. Gai. 337, 339), including the view found in the Hebrew Bible that God does not change his mind (e.g. Deus Imm. 72; Vit. Mos. 1.283), ethical repentance (e.g. Leg. Gai. 2.60; 3.211; Deus Imm. 8; Fug. 99; Somn. 91; Jos. 87; Vit. Mos. 2.167; Spec. Leg. 1.103; 4.221; Leg. All. 303), and repentance associated with the cult (e.g. Mut. Nom. 235; Spec. Leg. 1.239, 241, 253; cf. Deus Imm. 8-9). Similarly, μετάνοια is used in the sense of changing mind (e.g. Flacc. 181), including God not changing his (e.g. Aet. Mund. 40; Deus Imm. 33), ethical repentance (e.g. Leg. All. 2.78; 3.106, 213; Det. Pot. Ins. 96; Mut. Nom. 235; Somn. 2.108, 109, 292; Abr. 17; 26; Spec. Leg. 1.102; Praem. Poen. 15, 22; cf. Spec. Leg. 1.58), and

similarities between Lk. 15.7, 10 and the joyful figure of Repentance in Jos. Asen. 15.8. It might be worth speculating (and it can be nothing more than speculation) that Luke deliberately wrote up—an extremely strong case can be made for Lk. 15.7, 10 as being editorial—his source full of assumptions concerning teshubah with μετανοέω and μετάνοια if it could be established that sentiments such as Jos. Asen. 15.8 were well known in the first century CE.
repenantce associated with the cult (e.g. *Sacr.* 132; *Mut. Nom.* 235; *Spec. Leg.* 1.187, 236; cf. *Fug.* 158-159; *Mut. Nom.* 124). μετάνοια can also have a similar function to μετανοέω, in the sense that it requires a change of behaviour as well as mind (e.g. *Abr.* 26; *Praem. Poen.* 15-16; *Spec. Leg.* 1.236). Most crucially for present purposes is Philo’s use of μετανοέω and μετάνοια in relation to conversion and proselytes—reminiscent of μετανοέω in that it involves a complete change—in a typically ostentatious passage (*Virt.* 175-82; cf. *Praem. Poen.* 169). Here repentance means ‘passing from ignorance to knowledge of things which it is disgraceful not to know, from senselessness to good sense, from incontinence to continence, from injustice to justice, from timidity to boldness’ and so ‘proselytes become at once temperate, continent, modest, gentle, kind, humane, serious, just, high-minded, truth lovers, superior to the desire for money and pleasure…” (*Virt.* 180-82).

So with Philo we once again get the familiar pattern of ἐπιστρέφω being used in a very similar sense to ἐπιστρέφω and μετανοέω/μετάνοια being used in a very similar sense to the MT מְנַעַה, particularly in the sense of regret, repent, change of mind and so on. But, as with the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, we get both the overlap between ἐπιστρέφω/ἐπιστροφή and μετανοέω/μετάνοια and, crucially, μετανοέω and μετάνοια being used for the conversion of gentiles. Before the significance of this for the gospel translations is discussed further, we should turn to Josephus to complete the picture of the Jewish literature in Greek.

**Josephus**

In the writings of Josephus ἐπιστρέφω is frequently used in a general ‘secular’ way. It is used to describe turning attention/being attracted to something (e.g. *War* 3.232; 4.180, 657; 5.377; 6.64, 154; *Ant.* 2.232; 13.431; 17.62), the twists and turns of a wall (e.g. *War* 5.145, 506), and physically turning around, returning from a journey, and retreating, whether it be a horse, an individual, an army or any other group of people (e.g. *War* 1.101, 306, 368; 2.90, 453, 619; 3.17; 4.60, 108, 131, 174, 202, 369, 427, 491; 5.59, 77, 80, 112, 416, 483, 487; 6.85, 248; *Ant.* 5.161; 6.285, 371; 7.15, 179, 265, 299; 16.351). Most importantly, it can also be used of changing a way of life. For example, in Josephus’ version of Joseph and the advances of his master’s wife (Gen. 39.6-18), he comments, ‘he endeavoured to curb the woman’s impulse and to turn (ἐπιστρέφειν) her passion into the path of reason’ (*Ant.* 2.53; cf. *Ant.* 12.396). It is worth noting that ἐπιστροφή is used with the meanings of attention (e.g. *Ant.* 2.293; 8.314; 9.237; 12.149; 17.275; 18.349; 19.151) and physical return (*Ant.* 8.235).

Josephus uses μετανοέω frequently in the sense of regretting, repenting and changing one’s mind, and it is not often clear which translation should be preferred (e.g. *War* 1.278; 2.303; 3.138, 389; 4.284, 350, 375; 5.319, 572; 6.123; 7.378; *Ant.* 2.309, 315, 320, 322; 5.108, 151, 240; 6.143, 284, 297; 7.153, 264; 8.225, 301; 9.168; 10.60, 123; 11.317; 12.273; 14.390; 18.118; *Life* 17, 110,
Interestingly, when Josephus uses μετανοεω in his discussion of John the Baptist (Ant. 18.118) it is not used to discuss John’s ministry but only in a banal sense, namely of Antipas changing his mind. Elsewhere, though, Josephus does use μετανοεω in a more ‘religious’ sense, namely for repenting of sins (e.g. Ant. 4.313; 7.320, 362; 8.301, 362; War 5.415; 6.103; cf. Ant. 4.142, 195). Similarly, Josephus uses μετανοια in the sense of repentance, a change of mind, reconsideration and remorse (e.g. War 1.10, 92, 444, 555; 3.127, 128; 4.354; 5.360; Ant. 2.107, 163; 3.22; 4.144; 5.166; 6.38; 7.54; 9.176; 13.314; 16.240, 352, 392; 20.178; Life 370; Apion 1.274). Again, the ‘religious’ sense of repentance of sins is also present. In the context of Ezra’s reading of the Law at Tabernacles, Josephus talks of the people’s ‘repentance (μετανοια) and sorrow over the sins they had formerly committed’ (Ant. 11.156; cf. War 6.364; Ant. 2.23, 51; 4.191; 16.125).

Josephus uses επιστρεφω/επιστροφη in an unexceptional manner in that it is consistent with LXX usage: it is used in the sense of re-turn, including some echoes of the prophetic sense of repentance. Likewise, μετανοεω/μετανοια is used in the sense of changing mind, repent, regret and so on. This may not seem like much but it does help provide an argument of collective weight for fairly consistent uses of επιστρεφω/επιστροφη and μετανοεω/μετανοια in Jewish literature in Greek from close to the time of the gospels and again suggesting that μετανοεω/μετανοια is not the obvious choice to translate words associated with תָּבִא/תָּבָא.

Before we turn to the New Testament, the Jewish literature in Greek should now be summarized. The use of επιστρεφω/επιστροφη quite naturally follows the Semitic use of בָּא. This is a highly important point because επιστρεφω/επιστροφη is often used in the sense of re-turn, including the prophetic sense of Jews re-turning to God. This would hold obvious problems for the Greek-writing translators of the gospels faced with traditions of John and Jesus preaching at Jews while at the same time having to preach these traditions with gentiles in the Christian community. On the other hand, μετανοεω/μετανοια could provide a potentially useful alternative which would solve such difficulties: not only does μετανοεω/μετανοια overlap with επιστρεφω/επιστροφη, but it can also be used to describe the conversion of the gentiles. With these thoughts in mind, we can now turn to New Testament usage.

**New Testament**

In the New Testament επιστρεφω is used in the conventional senses of physically returning, turning around, and so on (e.g. Mk 5.30; 8.33; Mk 13.16/Mt. 24.18/Lk. 17.31; Mt. 12.44; Lk. 2.39; 8.55; 17.4; 22.32; Acts 9.40; 15.36; 16.18; 2 Pet. 2.22; Rev. 1.12; cf. Mt. 10.13) and in the more religious sense of turning or re-turning to the Lord, both of Jews (e.g. Mk 4.12/Mt. 13.15; Lk. 1.16; Jn 21.20; Acts 3.19; 9.35; 28.27; cf. Lk. 1.17; 17.4; 2 Cor. 3.16; Jas 5.19-20) and,
with the context made absolutely clear, gentiles (e.g. Acts 11.21; 15.19; 26.18, 20; 1 Thess. 1.9; cf. Acts 14.15; Gal. 4.9), where ‘turn’ as opposed to ‘re-turn’ is the obvious sense. The synoptic use of ἐπιστρέφω in a ‘religious’ sense is significant in the gospels because it in no way contradicts the possibility of gentile conversion. It is used only in a ‘religious’ sense once in Matthew and Mark (Mk 4.12/Mt. 13.15) and this is in the context of a biblical quotation from Isa. 6.10 with reference to outsiders, presumably Jews who rejected Jesus’ message:

And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again (ἐπιστρέψωι) and be forgiven.”’ (Mk 4.11-12)

In the Gospel of Luke, ἐπιστρέφω explicitly occurs once in a ‘religious’ sense with an unambiguous reference to the salvation of Jews and Jews alone, which fits in neatly with Luke’s salvation history where John belongs more to the period of the Law and Prophets (cf. Lk. 16.16): ‘He [John the Baptist] will turn (ἐπιστρέψει) many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God’ (Lk. 1.16; cf. 1.17; 17.4; 22.32). Noteworthy is the only New Testament occurrence of ἐπιστροφή in Acts 15.3 where it is made absolutely clear that it refers to the conversion of gentiles, again fitting in neatly with Luke’s salvation history, namely the time of the post-resurrection church.

μετανοέω is always used in some kind of ‘religious’ or ethical sense in the New Testament (Mk 1.15/Mt. 4.17; Mk 6.12; Mt. 3.2; 11.20; 11.21/Lk. 10.13; Mt. 12.41/Lk. 11.32; Lk. 13.3, 5; 15.7, 10; 16.30; 17.3-4; Acts 2.38; 3.19; 8.22; 17.30; 26.20; 2 Cor. 12.21; Rev. 2.5, 16, 21-22; 3.3, 19; 9.20-21; 16.9, 11). Likewise μετάνοια is always used in a ‘religious’ or ethical sense (Mk 1.4/Lk. 3.3; Mt. 3.8/Lk. 3.8; Mt. 3.11; Lk. 5.32; 15.7; 24.47; Acts 5.31; 11.18; 13.24; 19.4; 20.21; 26.20; Rom. 2.4; 2 Cor. 7.9, 10; 2 Tim. 2.25; Heb. 6.1, 6; 12.17; 2 Pet. 3.9). Notice that, importantly, μετανοέω can be tied in with ἐπιστρέφω in the sense of repenting and turning to God (Acts 3.19; 26.20; cf. Joel 2.14; Isa. 46.8; Jer. 18.8).

On one level, the gospel material is therefore consistent with the Jewish uses of μετανοέω/μετάνοια and ἐπιστρέφω/ἐπιστροφή but there are notable developments. ἐπιστρέφω/ἐπιστροφή is used in the sense of returning, including the prophetic sense of turning or re-turning to God but it is used of both Jews and gentiles. However, when it is used of Jews alone the context is absolutely clear and it does not contradict the possibility of gentile conversion in any way. Moreover, it is not used in the recorded teaching of Jesus, other than in the significant sense of the rejection of his message. This is surely no coincidence. I would suggest that this is because of the potential interpretation, which would have been present in the Semitic tradition, of Jesus’ teaching being limited to Jews alone.
Conclusions

We can, therefore, see that there was a stable and consistent use of all the relevant words for the background to the call to repentance in the teaching of both the historical John the Baptist and the historical Jesus. The Semitic background makes it overwhelmingly likely that the *teshubah* concept of repentance is the correct background for the teaching of John and Jesus on repentance. Not only is it massively attested but the idea of Jews returning to God is exactly what we find in the messages of John and Jesus. In contrast to this, מנ, the Hebrew equivalent of *μετανοέω*, is not well attested, at least not in the sense of repent, regret or remorse. In fact this sense of the word appears to be absent from a wide range of Jewish sources from around the time of John and Jesus and so it is overwhelmingly likely that מנ is not the correct Semitic background for the teachings of John and Jesus. In addition to this it is worth recalling that the Syriac translations of the gospels avoid מנ and consistently use some form of בות for *μετανοέω* and מֶטָנָוָיָא.

It has also been explained why the gospel writers avoided the most obvious word for the translation of מָנ, namely לְפִּיוֹרְפָא. In Jewish literature in Greek, לְפִּיוֹרְפָא (and לְפִּיוֹרְפָא) is consistently used to describe a re-turn of some form and when used in the sense of repentance it is used to describe Jews re-turning to God. In this sense it is notable that the New Testament virtually avoids it in the sense of repentance until the post-Jesus church. The gospel writers instead develop the repentance traditions with the words *μετανοέω* and מֶטָנָוָיָא. This was no doubt useful for at least two reasons: not only is there some overlap with לְפִּיוֹרְפָא, but מֶטָנָוָיָא and מֶטָנָוָיָא can also be used to describe the conversion of gentiles in Jewish literature. This provided a perfect solution for the gospel writers to the problem of the language associated with Jews re-turning to God without reference to gentiles. The gospel writers could theoretically have used לְפִּיוֹרְפָא with gentiles in mind, as Luke does in Acts when the context makes it unambiguously clear that he is dealing with gentiles (e.g. Acts 11.21; 15.19; 26.18, 20), but what we know of the messages of John and Jesus indicates that they were dealing with Jews almost exclusively. The gospel writers knew this (e.g. Mk 7.26-27; Mt. 10.5-6; Lk. 1.16; see also Acts 13.24, ‘before his [Jesus’] coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance [μετανοιας] to all the people of Israel’). But the message of repentance remained important for gentile Christians and so the seemingly exclusive reference to Jews re-turning had to be dropped. This explains why לְפִּיוֹרְפָא is avoided by the gospel writers when describing the teachings of John and Jesus.

31. Recall that Luke can use לְפִּיוֹרְפָא for Jews when the context makes it unambiguously clear that Jews alone are in mind (Lk. 1.16).
Jesus. Yet a message of repentance was always going to remain important for the early Christians. For example, John’s ‘baptism of repentance’, initially aimed at Jews, became important, of course, for all Christians entering the church and so it almost goes without saying that this had to be made clear and it was made clear by avoiding ἐπιστρέφω and ἐπιστροφή and using language more suited to gentile converts: μετανοέω and μετάνοια.

This study of the linguistic background can also help in evaluating further alternative proposals put forward at the beginning of this article. The consistent use of μετανοέω, μετάνοια and ἐπιστρέφω again indicates that Behm’s suggestion that μετανοέω was the preferred alternative to ἐπιστρέφω for the translation of בַחֵן is not strong, although it should be mentioned once again that the increasing use of μετανοέω to translate בַחֵן remains an important point which would have contributed to the translations of the gospel writers, helped in part by the overlap between μετανοέω and ἐπιστρέφω. In fact, given the virtual absence of any concept of Mxn repentance in the relevant Semitic literature of the period,32 it is quite possible that μετανοέω was translating בַחֵן/בַחֵן in those Jewish works from the Second Temple period which were originally written in a Semitic language. The other alternative suggestion made in Boyd-Luter’s ABD entry, namely that the idea of a change of mind is more relevant than the Semitic concept of turning and returning, is further damaged in the light of this study as another criticism can now be added: given the virtual absence of any concept of בַחֵן repentance in the relevant Semitic literature, it is extremely difficult to understand what Aramaic word would have been used by John the Baptist and Jesus other than some form of בַחֵן.

Psychological studies of Jesus have been neglected, but they may, in fact, make a contribution to historical Jesus studies. Jay Haley’s 1969 essay, ‘The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ’, is suggestive in this regard. Haley emphasizes Jesus’ appeal to the poor through healings, his rhetorical skills against the establishment, and his creation of an organization of dedicated men. His views that Jesus’ organization was hierarchically ordered and that Jesus made a fateful miscalculation leading to his execution are evaluated and reinterpreted in light of more recent scholarship.

Key Words: historical Jesus, power tactics, psychological study of Jesus, hierarchy, temple incident

In an earlier article,¹ I suggested that Albert Schweitzer’s stinging critique of psychiatric studies of Jesus published in the first decade of the twentieth century² has cast a very long shadow, as it has discouraged the use of psychological theories and methods in historical Jesus studies. When such studies have appeared, they have received little attention, and their status in historical Jesus studies has been extremely marginal. In this article, I will discuss Jay Haley’s essay, ‘The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ’, originally published in 1969,³ thus coinciding with a renewed interest among biblical scholars in the study of the

historical Jesus. In my view, this essay by a leading authority in strategic family therapy offers an insightful psychological portrait of Jesus, as it focuses on Jesus as a man who was skilled in the use of power. After presenting Haley’s portrait of Jesus, I will discuss an important implication of his view that all organizations are hierarchical, namely, that Jesus was uncompromising in his opposition to all human *paternal* authority. I will also address his contention that Jesus miscalculated the outcome of the temple disturbance.

**Haley’s Portrait of Jesus**

Haley is known in family therapy circles for his emphasis on the problem of how to change the locus of power in a family. If such a change is to be realized, the therapist must use ‘power tactics’ to counter the ‘power tactics’ of the family. These tactics, however, need to be subtle and often indirect, as the overt use or exhibition of power is likely to be counterproductive. An example of the therapist’s use of power is defining the problem to which the therapy will be directed in such a way that it not only expresses what the family or the individual client wants changed, but is also ‘put in a form that makes it solvable’. Another is establishing himself as the gatekeeper of information:

> In actuality or illusion, he should be defined as the one who allows or permits information to pass. Therefore, his power is enhanced if he is provided with secrets to be protected. The more an individual or group give a therapist information it wishes concealed, the more power and status the therapist is given.

Haley also discusses the relationship between power and organization, noting that, ‘If there is one generalization that applies to humans and other animals, it is that all creatures capable of learning are compelled to organize. To be organized means to follow patterned, redundant ways of behaving and to exist in a hierarchy. Creatures that organize together form a status, or power, ladder in which each creature has a place in the hierarchy, with those above and those below’. While groups will have more than one hierarchy because of different functions, ‘the existence of hierarchy is inevitable because it is in the nature of organization that it be hierarchal. We may dream of a society in which all creatures are equal, but on this earth there are status and precedence and inequality among all creatures’.

As hierarchy is unavoidable, all groups ‘must deal with the issue of organizing in a hierarchy, and rules must be worked out about who is primary in status

6. Haley, *Problem-Solving Therapy*. This and following quotations are from pp. 107-110.
and power and who is secondary’. When ‘the status positions in a hierarchy are confused, or unclear, there will be a struggle that an observer would characterize as a power struggle’. An observer ‘who has a theory of innate aggression or of a need for power may say that the participants are satisfying an inner drive by struggling for power’. But a more useful theory is that this struggle is ‘an effort to clarify, or work out, the positions in the hierarchy of an organization’.

How Jesus Acquired Power

Haley’s title, ‘The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ’, makes clear that he intends to understand Jesus’ public career from the same perspective that informs his therapeutic work with families, focusing on power and power relationships. He defines power in this way: ‘A person has achieved “power” when he has established himself as the one who is to determine what is going to happen’.7 Power tactics are ‘those maneuvers a person uses to give himself influence and control over his social world and so make the world more predictable’. Thus, ‘a man has power if he can order someone to behave in a certain way, but he also has power if he can provoke someone to behave in that way. One man may order others to lift and carry him, while another might achieve the same end by collapsing. Both men are determining what is to happen in their social environment by the use of a power tactic.’

Gaining power appears to be more important to some individuals than any subjective distress they might experience. For example, ‘The alcoholic who says to the bartender, “If you want me out of here, throw me out”, may suffer pain and indignity, but he determines the outcome of the interchange’. It is even possible to determine what is going to happen from beyond the grave, ‘as victims of wills and those whose intimates have committed suicide will testify’. Haley concludes: ‘When we examine the tactics of Jesus, it is useful to consider power tactics defined this broadly.’

Besides the synoptic gospels, Haley’s primary sources for his analysis of Jesus’ power tactics are Schweitzer’s The Psychiatric Study of Jesus and The Quest of the Historical Jesus, and Josephus’s The War of the Jews, Or The History of the Destruction of Jerusalem. He also has footnote references to Eric Hoffer’s The True Believer, which focuses on leaders of mass movements and their followers. Haley recognizes that what we know of Jesus is based on the writings of members of his organization, so questions about Jesus’ own contribution to organizational strategy can always be raised due to doubts about the objectivity and authenticity of these writings. Still, one can discern the basic

7. Haley, ‘The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ’. The following quotations are from this essay.
pattern of Jesus’ organizational strategy. Basically, what Jesus was able to do, where others had failed, was to organize the poor and powerless into a force capable of a sustained threat to the establishment rather than the occasional sporadic riot. How did he do this? It involved several stages.

**Stage 1: Becoming Known**
The problem that any aspiring leader who was not born into a royal or priestly family faces is that of becoming known. What Jesus had going for him in this regard were several factors. One was the discontent of the populace which was directed to a large degree against ‘a priestly hierarchy made up of families which were exploitative and were maintained in power by the occupying Roman colonists’. Another was that the power structure was divided. The geographical division after the death of Herod had left conflict and resentment. The ‘wealthy class and the priests had their differences, the priestly hierarchy was in internal conflict, and the Romans were sufficiently hated to cause a cleavage between the governor and the populace. The establishment could not offer a united front against a bid for power’.

A third was the mythology of the time, that is, the persistent myth among the populace that all difficulties could be magically alleviated by the Lord or a Messiah who would relieve all misery, strike down all enemies, and place the tribes of Israel in power… At the time Jesus stepped into the public road, there seems to have been an accepted general belief that a single man could arrive and put everything right.

In thus emphasizing Messianic expectations, Haley seems to be drawing very explicitly on Schweitzer’s portrayal of Jesus.

A fourth was that in Judaism a man could rise from low to high estate by following a religious life. This is the path chosen by Jesus, who was outside the pale of organized power, but appeared in public as a religious prophet, using the popular tradition of itinerancy which stood against and contrasted with the settled and entrenched establishment with its power base in the cities. This tradition was also helpful if one wished to gain a reputation before too much opposition was aroused: ‘The state and the priestly hierarchy were accustomed to criticism within the prophetic framework so that by custom a man could be heard without being immediately extinguished.’

In order to attract and keep an audience, an itinerant prophet would need to speak in a certain way. If he said only what was orthodox, no one would listen, as they could hear the same or similar ideas from the established religious leaders. But to say the unorthodox risked losing an audience by antagonizing a people devoted to an established religion that was built into their lives and very being. Jesus handled this dilemma with unusual adroitness by managing ‘to call attention to himself as an authority who was presenting new ideas’ while ‘defining what he said as proper orthodoxy’. He achieved this feat in two ways.
He insisted that he was not advocating a change and then he called for change, and he claimed that the ideas he was presenting were not deviations from the established religion but a truer expression of the ideas of that religion.

His skill in calling simultaneously for conformity and change is best expressed in his discussion of the law and its demands (Mt. 5.17-22). On the one hand, he claimed that he was not advocating the destruction of the law but its fulfillment. Thus, whoever breaks even the least of the commandments and teaches others to do so will be called ‘the least in the kingdom of heaven’, but whoever teaches and does them ‘shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt. 5.17-19). (Note that Haley selects a text that has to do with the hierarchy in all organizations, and that this text assumes a similar hierarchy in the kingdom of heaven.) On the other hand, if Jesus had only ‘conformed to this teaching, no one could have had the slightest objection to what he might have said. He would have been collecting followers for the establishment rather than himself’. So, he proceeded to offer himself as the authority by providing major revisions of the law. He says:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment’. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘you fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire (Mt. 5.21-22).

One could hardly consider this anything but a basic revision of the law, for he is saying that persons should be punished for their thoughts as well as their deeds. He also advocates revisions in the laws of adultery, divorce, revenge, the procedure for taking oaths, for giving charity, the method of prayer, and the way to fast. In fact, ‘Little is left of the established law when he has redesigned it—after stating that he has not come to change a letter of the law.’ Thus, ‘By calling for conformity to the law, Jesus disarms opposition. By then redesigning the law, he sets himself up as an equal in power and authority to the entire religious establishment of the state’. Not surprisingly, Matthew claims that his listeners were ‘astonished at his doctrine. For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes’ (Mt. 5.28-29).

The culture that Jesus inherited provided him with a special opportunity to be an authority, as it was assumed in Israel that the laws to be followed had been established in the beginning and one could only discover and interpret them. In other cultures, similar laws may be viewed as the product of consensus; the citizenry makes its own laws and agree, more or less, to abide by them. But when ‘it is assumed that laws exist independent of man and one can only discover what they are, a single individual can speak with as much authority as an establishment because he can claim to have discerned the true law’. He can therefore request or even demand a change by claiming that his opponents have deviated from the law. Throughout his career, then, ‘Jesus attacked the leaders of the
establishment consistently and cleverly, but he based his attack within their religious framework. He said they deviated from the true religion, setting himself up as the authority on what the true religion should be’. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus compliment any established religious leader, except those long deceased: ‘The nearest to a compliment he pays [to a contemporary] is to his fellow and competing prophet, John’. Yet, even here, while asserting that John is the greatest among those born of women, he adds that in the kingdom of heaven the one who is least of all is greater than John (Mt. 11.11).

Jesus brought himself to the attention of the populace by making use of the popular tradition of the itinerant prophet. But this would not account for the fact that he appears to have become much better known than other itinerant Galilean prophets. Saying things that people hadn’t heard openly voiced before may arouse an audience, but an insurgent religious leader also needs to offer something tangible and concrete. What Jesus had was an ability to cure people of their physical and mental distress. Thus,

the reputation of Jesus as a healer gave him his greatest notoriety. It is the nature of the healing trade to strike a deep chord of wishful thinking in people. Legends build quickly and success in healing breeds belief in success and therefore more success. Certainly once a man had a reputation as a healer a touch of his robes could produce cures (which was why a guard was maintained to keep the masses of diseased people from touching the robes of the Roman emperor).

Whether Jesus had more than usual skill is impossible to determine, ‘but the fact that he chose to be a healer demonstrates his ability to select a way to become immediately famous. Perhaps no other device would have spread his name so quickly, particularly in an age when medicine was inadequate against disease and people were emotionally wrought up over the possession of devils’. Moreover, ‘Since illness knows no class, this reputation also gave him access to the rich and he was begged for his assistance by the leader of a synagogue’ and others.

The fact that Jesus downplayed his cures was also evidence of his strategic ability. In refusing to boast about his cures and so arouse investigations and resistance, he advised his patients to keep their cure a secret. Since no one who has been cured of a lifelong distress is likely or able to conceal the cure, the result was that cures were broadcast by others. As a result, only the statements of others could be refuted. It was only when messengers sent by John to ask if he was ‘the one who was to come’ that Jesus referred to his healings as evidence, and even then he makes no claims relating to himself. He merely states: ‘The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the leper are cleansed, and the deaf hear…’ (Mt. 11.4-5).

There is another power tactic that an unknown can use if he wishes to become known quickly, but it has certain risks: ‘If a man wishes to be thought of as an equal, or a superior, to a powerful opponent, he can make audacious
personal attacks upon him. The more audacious the attack, the more prominent does the attacker become if it is widely known.’ Such attacks may place the leader of a small mass movement on the same plane as the powerful opponent. Jesus used this tactic when he called the established religious leaders serpents, a generation of vipers who will not escape the damnation of hell (Mt. 23.33), and when he made a physical assault on the religious hierarchy by attacking the money changers in the temple. Haley believes, however, that this attack was a tactical miscalculation that cost Jesus his life. Thus, an audacious attack on a powerful opponent may pay great dividends, but it can also backfire.

Stage 2: Building an Organization
Haley next takes up the fact that Jesus built an organization. He contrasts Jesus with prophets such as John the Baptist, a solitary man who lived outside of society, who are dependent on transient followers who ‘might be attracted to them out of curiosity or because they sought a touch of divinity’. As a member of John’s group, Jesus may have perceived that it was too loosely organized and that it did not require long-term loyalty and commitment. In any event, he began his own public career by choosing men to join him in his movement. According to Matthew (4.18-19), one of his first acts was to recruit a cadre who would recruit others. He had at least twelve in his organization and, if Luke is to be believed (10.1, 17), he had an additional seventy, ‘which is an organization of some size’ (p. 30).

In his selection of this elite, he did not recruit among the members of the establishment but from the lower strata of the population, from which he was also gathering his public following: ‘When he recruited his men, he asked of them what is now typically asked of any small revolutionary cadre. They had to give up everything related to ambition in the society as it was and abandon all other commitments to others, including family ties, when they joined him.’ Thus, he declared that anyone who loved father, mother, son or daughter more than he was not worthy of him (Mt. 10.37), and he said to the young man who wanted to do his filial duty to his father before joining his movement, ‘Let the dead bury the dead’ (Lk. 9.60). In making this demand, however, he did not ask more of the others than he asked of himself. When informed that his mother and brothers were outside and wished to speak with him, he said, “Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?” Again he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, “Behold my mother and my brethren”’ (Mt. 12.48-49).

In return for their absolute commitment, Jesus gave his men elite status. They had authority to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out demons, and raise the dead, all the activities from which he had achieved personal fame. He also melded them together with promises. When Peter is said to have asked what they would gain by following him, he promised them that they would sit on thrones of their own, as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19.28). Thus,
his promise to his men included what they would achieve once he came into power, and not merely what they might gain from listening to him, as they might to a teacher. He also effectively threatened them, saying, ‘But whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven’ (Mt. 10.33). As the story of Peter’s denials suggests (Mt. 26.69-75), this was a threat that would come back to haunt the men following his untimely death.

He also kept his men unsure as to their personal future in the kingdom. By raising doubts whether they would be finally acceptable to him, he insured that they would remain actively dedicated in following him. As Mt. 7.22-23 puts it: ‘On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers”’. He also used the persecutory actions of others as a tactic for securing group unity, declaring that he sent them out as sheep in the midst of wolves, and enjoining them therefore to be as wise as serpents, but as harmless as doves (Mt. 10.16). This dual approach to their adversaries was itself the device of a shrewd tactical leader.

Another indication of his careful attention to tactics was in instructing his men to go out as poor men without money or extra clothes (Mt. 10.9-10). The point was not that they were to present themselves as ascetics, akin to John the Baptist, but that they were to present themselves as being just as poor as the people among whom they were seeking to win a following: ‘One can take a second coat and still cure, but one cannot win followers among the poor with money or a second coat or even shoes.’

If he taught his cadre his own methods and encouraged them to use them, how did he insure that no member of his group tried to usurp his position? If there were power struggles in the group, why were they not directed against him? Haley thinks that Jesus forestalled any challenge to his leadership position by putting his men in their places by criticizing their obtuseness in not understanding his teachings, their inability to heal people properly, and their jealousy over who was closest to him now and who would hold the highest rank next to him when success came. Even as Jesus paid no member of the religious establishment a compliment, he paid no special compliment to any member of his cadre. The nearest thing to such a compliment is his response to Peter’s suggestion that Jesus was ‘the Christ, the Son of the Living God’, declaring that Peter is surely blessed, as this insight was revealed to him by Jesus’ Father in heaven (Mt. 16.17). Yet, when Peter protested Jesus’ subsequent declaration that he must go to Jerusalem and be put to death, he charged that Peter was now speaking with the voice of Satan and was therefore ‘an offense’ to him (Mt. 16.23).

Whether Jesus was justified in criticizing his men in this way is open to interpretation, but, in any case, the gospels indicate that he did not succeed in training them to be as skillful as he was at handling the criticism of others:
‘Whenever Jesus was attacked or questioned, he responded with attack or question, always putting his critics in their places and never using defensive behavior’. Yet, after his death, when his men were amazing a crowd by speaking in various tongues, a critic said, contemptuously, ‘These men are full of new wine’. Peter responded to this attack for the whole group, noting that they could not be drunk because it was only the third hour of the day (Acts 2.13-15). Haley dryly observes: ‘That was hardly a reply worthy of the master.’

Stage 3: Collecting a Following

Haley next takes up Jesus’ method of collecting a following. Ordinarily, if a man seeks power in a society he must work his way up within the existing established political structure. Some might argue that Jesus did not seek political power because he made no attempt to secure a position within the established religious hierarchy, just as he emphasized the more supernatural ‘Son of Man’ rather than the more political ‘Son of David’. But this is to overlook the new strategy that he employed, one that bypassed the current political establishment and appealed for support among the dispossessed of society: ‘His basic tactic was to define the poor as more deserving of power than anyone else and so curry their favor. With the first statements of his public life he pointed out that the poor were blessed’, that they were ‘the salt of the earth, the light of the world’, and that they, the weak, ‘would inherit the earth’. By the same token, he consistently attacked the rich, saying that they would have difficulty entering his kingdom, and speaking to audiences of the last he emphasized that the last would be first. Not only did he send his elite out as poor men, but he himself gained a reputation for wining and dining with the outcasts of respectable society. Nowhere does he criticize the poor, but only the rich, the learned, and the priestly establishment.

He offered those who agreed with him ‘the opportunity to suffer for a good cause’ by pointing out to them that their reward would be great in the kingdom if they are reviled, persecuted and falsely accused for his sake (Mt. 5.11-12). In return, he ‘offered to take all problems upon himself’, encouraging his hearers who labor and are heavy laden to come to him and he would give them rest (Mt. 11.28-30). He also assured them that if they heard his words and acted on them they would be like the man who built his house on a rock; but if they didn’t, he warned that they would be like the man who built his house on sand so that it comes crashing down in the turbulent times to come (Mt. 7.24-27).

Jesus’ manner of collecting a following indicates that he was establishing long-range plans for his organization. This is evident from the fact that he pinned his hopes on ‘separating the young from ties to their parents and the current establishment’. Leaders of mass movements have typically emphasized reaching the young people, and have used the young against dissidents among their own followers. Jesus ‘called for the breaking of family ties and the pitting of the young against their elders. The conservative force of the family is an impediment
to any mass movement, and only after becoming the establishment does a revolutionary group call for family solidarity’. Also, revolutionary leaders generally say that they are not to be followed for their own person but for what their person represents. Thus, as individuals, they do not take full credit, or blame, for what they say, ‘because they are only spokesmen for a greater force’. Jesus ‘insisted that he did not speak for himself but only expressed the will of his heavenly Father’. But this meant that he defined opposition to himself as opposition to his Father, and he inhibited resistance to himself and accusations of self-aggrandizement by consistently pointing out that he was a mere instrument. He also defined himself as the only instrument who was able to interpret the heavenly Father correctly, because he was on intimate terms with the Father.

Finally, an important tactic that Jesus used in collecting a following was to point to the inevitability of his coming to power. This way, the irresistible was on his side. This is a tactic that other revolutionary leaders have subsequently employed: ‘By arguing that they are only shortening the time of arrival, or clarifying the progress of an inevitable event, such leaders encourage recruits to accept an established fact and inhibit opponents who might fear going against the course of history.’ Because Jesus endorsed the same tradition to which the religious establishment and the overwhelming majority of the people subscribed, he could count on the reluctance of the religious establishment to challenge him, not only because they feared his power among the people, but also because they feared that he might be right both in his interpretations of this tradition and in what these interpretations predicted regarding the coming of the kingdom of God. After all, they shared his view that the earthly powers and principalities would, one day, be supplanted by the reign of God. Evidence of their reluctance to silence him altogether is the fact that, while they disputed things he said, he was allowed to teach in the synagogues.

**The Major Tactical Contribution of Jesus**

Haley believes that Jesus’ major tactical contribution, used by all revolutionary leaders subsequently, was to mobilize the poor against the establishment. While revolutionary leaders have condemned Jesus for the tactics he introduced, these objections ‘are not based on a study of the tactics as Jesus used them, but on the way established powers learned to use them later’. Established powers, often using Christian rhetoric, have been able to remain in power by persuading the oppressed to look to a future life for their reward. In contrast, while Jesus ‘promised a paradise in some ill-defined future’ for those who followed him, he ‘implied that the day was in the not too distant future’. If he was pinning his hopes on the younger generation, he nonetheless declared that some persons standing in his midst would not taste death until the kingdom of God comes in power
Thus, unlike later Christian established powers, who promised a reward in heaven, Jesus envisioned a new world order with the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth. Therefore, when he promised a reward, he did not use this as a way of persuading the poor to accept their misery, but in order to enlist them in accelerating the coming of the Kingdom. He also presented them with a choice having real consequences. He promised that if they followed him and resisted the establishment, they would be amply rewarded, but if they followed the establishment, they would suffer dire consequences. As Mt. 13.41-43 puts it: ‘The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. Let anyone with ears listen!’

Revolutionary leaders who have condemned Christians for using tactics of weakness also misunderstand Jesus’ own strategic position: ‘While Bolsheviks might argue that force must be met by force, and when Hitler said that terror must be met with equal terror, they were adapting to a quite different situation.’ There was no way that Jesus could marshal force against the force of Rome or terror equal to the actions of the establishment: ‘A leader at that time might achieve sporadic riots, but organized attack against the occupying Roman force was futile, as Roman executions regularly demonstrated.’ Insofar as the Romans were supporting the religious establishment and permitting it authority over the people, those who opposed the religious establishment risked being exterminated: ‘In this situation Jesus developed the surrender tactic, a procedure which has been used by the powerless in the face of the invincible to this day.’

**The Surrender Tactic**

Haley gives considerable attention to the specific tactic of surrender, as he believes that it played a significant role in Jesus’ personal confrontation with the establishment and was a major factor in his execution. What is the surrender tactic? Noting that Jesus advises his listeners to consider the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, and to emulate them, Haley suggests comparing this particular tactic to those employed by animals. Citing the observations of the ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, he notes that when two wolves are in a fight and one is about to be killed, the defeated wolf will suddenly lift his head and bare his throat to his opponent: ‘The opponent becomes incapacitated and he cannot kill him as long as he is faced with this tactic. Although he is the victor, the vanquished is controlling his behavior merely by standing still and offering his vulnerable jugular vein’. The turkey does the very same thing.

In his study of Gandhi’s tactics of nonviolence, Erik H. Erikson also invokes Lorenz’s studies, citing not only the example of wolves but also the antler
tournament of the Damstags. This is a contest that ends when the loser ‘concedes the tournament by a ritualized disengagement which normally stops the attack of the victor’. Yet, Erikson cites Lorenz’s observation that the ritual may fail, and end in ‘violence to the death. Skeletons of stags whose antlers are entwined in death have been found; but they are victims of an instinctive ritual that failed’.8

Haley cites Lorenz’s own connection between Jesus and animal behavior. Commenting on the lessons to be learned from the behavior of wolves, Lorenz wrote, ‘I at least have extracted from it a new and deeper understanding of a wonderful and often misunderstood saying from the Gospel, which hitherto had only awakened in me the feelings of strong opposition. “And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other” (Lk. 6.29). A wolf has enlightened me: not so that your enemy may strike you again do you turn the other cheek toward him, but to make him unable to do it.’

Haley points out that Jesus did not originate the surrender tactic. In his Antiquities (Book 18, Chapter 3), Josephus reports that Pilate’s troops surrounded a mob of protesters and told them that they would be killed if they did not disperse. Instead of dispersing, the unarmed protesters ‘flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready to die rather than to transgress the [ancient Jewish] law’. By extending their necks, they were acting precisely like the wolf in Lorenz’s example. The banners of Caesar which Pilate had erected in Jerusalem, the provocation for this protest, were taken down.

The ‘surrender tactic’ is not merely a device by animals and humans to suffer defeat without being extinguished, for ‘it is also possible to see the procedure as a way of determining what is to happen. You cannot defeat a helpless opponent; if you strike him and your blows are unreturned, you can only suffer feelings of guilt and exasperation as well as doubt about who is the victor’. This tactic has proven itself effective by anxious parents who find that helplessness will enforce their directives more tyrannically than giving orders. And, of course, ‘the extreme tactic of threat of suicide falls in a similar category’.

It is not, however, without its risks. It seems to be a tactic that either wins or provokes murderous extermination. The fact that Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King died violent deaths, just as surely as if they had lived by the sword, does not seem coincidental. This raises the question why it works in some situations but not in others? Haley believes that ‘the use of weakness to determine what is to happen in a power struggle works most effectively if there is a threat of violence in the background to support the meek tactic’. If the opponent believes that he will not be able to control the violent actions that may follow from the murderous extermination of the one who surrenders, or will suffer an

unacceptable number of casualties in achieving this control, he is more likely to allow the user of the surrender tactic to win, and may explain his seemingly weak behavior as an act of mercy. Thus, the opponent needs to believe that his extermination of the one who bares his neck, so to speak, carries unacceptable risks. But if he believes that he will be able to control any residual consequences of the extermination without unacceptable risks to himself, he may take advantage of the opportunity that has been handed him, virtually on a silver platter, and exterminate his tormentor.

There is also the risk that even if the one to whom one surrenders capitulates, he may not be in a position to insure that others will do likewise. An individual or group who is enraged by the fact that the surrender succeeded may decide to do what the original adversary would not do. Thus, the surrender tactic is risky because one cannot control every aspect of the process that it sets in motion. A case in point is Josephus’s account of what happened after the protesters achieved their goal of forcing Pilate to remove the banners of Caesar. Pilate sought to bring ‘a current of water’ to Jerusalem, paying for the project with sacred money. Tens of thousands of Jews, displeased by this action, ‘made a clamor’ against Pilate and also publicly ‘reproached’ and ‘abused’ him. So he organized his soldiers to surround them, and when the crowd refused to disperse but instead hurled more reproaches upon him, Pilate gave the soldiers a prearranged signal to move against the crowd. But the soldiers ‘laid upon them much greater blows than Pilate had commanded them’, and they indiscriminately attacked those who were ‘tumultuous, and those that were not’. They ‘did not spare them in the least; and since the people were unarmed, and were caught by men prepared for what they were about [i.e. carried concealed daggers], there were a great number of them slain by this means, and others of them ran away wounded; and thus an end was put to this sedition’. Thus, Pilate lost control over his own soldiers, and this confrontation, unlike the previous confrontation, ended in bloodshed. In the very next paragraph, Josephus mentions that Jesus appeared at ‘about this time’ and at ‘the suggestion of the principal men’ around him, Pilate condemned him to the cross.

The Climax of the Struggle for Power

Following his discussion of Jesus’ surrender tactic, Haley focuses on the outcome of Jesus’ struggle for power against the establishment. In his view, the preceding examination of Jesus as a tactician not only increases our understanding of the nature of the power struggle in which he was engaged, but also suggests

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‘a possible resolution’ of some of the contradictions in the gospels relating to the final days of his life: ‘In their determination to prove him innocent [the gospels] neglect to state what charges were made against him, and their attempts to fit his actions into complicated prophecies about the Messiah compound the confusion’. But what is clear is that when Jesus went into ‘the final struggle he arranged a situation where there was no hope of compromise. He condemned the clergy, he condemned the temple, and finally he made a physical assault on the temple’. While he ‘took care’ not to call for open rebellion against the priestly hierarchy, he ‘thoroughly discredited them’. As Mt. 23.4 indicates, he made this accusation against them: ‘They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they are unwilling to lift a finger to move them’. A series of ‘woe to you’ condemnations follow, in which he declares that they are ‘blind guides’ and ‘hypocrites’.

Such verbal attacks would have rung hollow if he did not also take action with his ‘audacious assault on the temple’. In attacking the commercial aspect of the temple and not violating the altar or intruding on the Holy of Holies, he chose his opponents’ ‘most vulnerable area for his attack’, thus again demonstrating ‘his skill as a tactician’. Accusing them of ‘turning a house of prayer into a robber’s cave’, he ‘could win immediate fame throughout the city while not giving his opposition an advantage. It was awkward for the priesthood to retaliate against him for his violent ways because he was quoting their own scripture to them, attacking a point difficult to defend’. In addition, he offered himself as an alternative to the establishment, pointing out that he could tear the temple down and rebuild it in three days, thus ushering in a new order to replace the old, corrupt order presided over by the priests who had forfeited their claim to legitimacy. The message was clear: He and his men would replace the old establishment with a new rule whose legitimation derived from the heavenly Father, not from Rome.

The position that he had taken was too extreme for the establishment not to take action of some kind. Apparently, they sought to lay their hands on him but ‘feared the multitude’ who had come for the Passover (Mt. 21.46). There was an attempt to stone him but he escaped. The only remaining alternative was to arrest him. His successful escape from stoning but surrender to arrest indicates that he sought the publicity of arrest and trial. Despite the confusion in the gospels about the events that followed his ‘audacious assault’ on the temple, these points, in Haley’s view, are reasonably clear:

1. Over his followers’ objections, Jesus insisted on going to Jerusalem to be arrested. When he arrived, he behaved in such an extreme manner that he forced his arrest. He either arranged that the arresting officers would find him, or waited patiently for them to come to him. He may even have planned Judas’s betrayal by, in effect, designating him as the betrayer (i.e. the one who was to lead the authorities to where
he was staying) during the final week with his disciples. After all, he announced the fact that there was a betrayer in their midst, yet apparently did nothing to stop him. This is not to say that he manipulated Judas into revealing his whereabouts to the authorities, but he did take advantage of Judas’s weakness.

2. He was tried and condemned to death by the Sanhedrin and was passed to the Roman government for execution.

3. Pilate declined to execute him since he found no evidence that he had broken Roman law.

4. Pilate turned to the populace for a decision and the crowd called for Jesus’ death.

Up until the time of his trial, Jesus’ behavior could have been interpreted in several ways, all consistent with his aggressive behavior and his willingness to be arrested: (1) He was actually the coming Messiah and this meant that he must therefore go through the prophetic pattern of being handed over to his enemies and executed; (2) he was sacrificing himself for the sins of the world as part of the messianic pattern, and this was his individual choice; (3) he went mad and decided that he was the Messiah and must die so that the kingdom of Heaven would immediately arrive; or (4) he did not intend to die but wanted to be arrested because he was pitting himself and the strength of his organization in a final power struggle with the establishment.

In Haley’s view, Jesus’ behavior after his arrest indicates that only the fourth interpretation fits the facts: ‘After permitting, or arranging, his arrest, he made it almost impossible for the establishment to condemn him and execute him.’ If he merely wished to be executed as part of the Messianic prophecy or to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world, he could have announced that he was the Messiah, opposed Roman rule, and his execution would have been routine. Or, if he had gone mad and sought to sacrifice himself in a suicidal manner, he would have behaved in a provocative way and made the execution simple. But, according to the gospel accounts, Jesus neither announced that he was the Messiah nor acted in a manner that would force the authorities to kill him. Rather, he refused to say that he was the coming Messiah and to speak in opposition to Rome: ‘In fact he behaved in such a way that execution appeared impossible—after amicably surrendering himself into the hands of the establishment.’ He did not curse or revile the religious and political establishment, or individual members of them, and did not even defend himself or assert his own authority. He said nothing through many hours of interrogation and the futile calling of witnesses. His response to direct questioning whether he claimed to be the Messiah was non-committal. His response—‘You have said so’—is taken as affirmative by the high priest and as a denial by Pilate. Since only one of the four gospels have him making this claim (Mk 14.62), while all agree that he maintained a remarkable
silence throughout the proceedings, Haley concludes that he made no such admission, and that this would be consistent with indications that he had never announced that he was the Messiah in his whole career.

Therefore, Jesus was counting on the strict application of rules of evidence to gain his acquittal, and thus to prove that the religious authorities were powerless to control him: ‘By remaining silent and providing only a final and ambiguous answer, Jesus made it legally impossible for them to condemn him to death.’ Thus, in handing him over to Pilate for execution, they broke their own rules, acting ‘in a fit of pique, on impulse’.

A remarkably similar situation occurred when he was brought before the Roman governor: ‘Although the establishment was given surprising autonomy for a subjected colonial people, they could not execute a man except with permission of Pilate. Once again, if Jesus was determined to be executed, he would have to persuade Pilate to give the order. Instead, he made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Pilate to order his execution.’ Throughout his public career, Jesus had been extremely circumspect in his behavior with the Romans. Nowhere in the gospels is there a statement by him which could be considered an attack on Rome. He did not stir up the populace against Rome, or oppose Roman taxation, though he did object to the temple tax (Mt. 17.26). At most, he included the Romans among all Gentiles and placed them outside the pale, instructing his disciples to deal only with Jews, saying, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt. 15.24). Attempts to provoke him into expressing anti-Roman sentiments are cleverly countered (Mt. 22.19-21).

While Haley considers the possibility that the gospel writers did not want to antagonize Rome and therefore suppressed Jesus’ anti-Roman sentiments, he believes, instead, that Jesus made no statements against Rome, and did so for tactical reasons: ‘Roman power must have appeared clearly invincible and a power strategist does not directly attack invincible power, he seeks other means of undermining it.’ Attacking the more vulnerable religious establishment which worked closely with the Roman governor was a much better strategy.

Without evidence that Jesus had even spoken against the Roman government, much less advocated action against it, Pilate had no legal grounds for executing him. But this placed him in a political quandary, one that Jesus may well have intended to provoke, as it pitted Pilate and the priestly hierarchy against each other. (In family systems’ terms, Jesus used the method of triangulation.) Placing the decision in the hands of the crowd that had gathered for the public trial was a counter move by Pilate designed to extricate himself from the dilemma into which Jesus’ behavior had placed him.

Haley acknowledges that the crowd’s decision to call for Jesus’ death is a puzzling one, especially if he was so popular that he had to be arrested secretly. He cites Schweitzer’s explanation in The Quest of the Historical Jesus that the crowd was informed that Jesus had claimed at the private trial before the
Sanhedrin that he was the Messiah, and on the basis of this misinformation they called for his death on the grounds of blasphemy, the very basis on which the high priest judged him guilty (Mt. 26.65-66). While more or less persuaded by Schweitzer’s explanation, Haley remains sufficiently puzzled by the crowd’s action to wonder if the episode is authentic, especially since there is no known tradition of a release of a prisoner at Passover. But, in the end, he concludes that ‘the gospel version would seem as adequate as any other’, basing this conclusion on the assumption that Jesus’ actions would ‘have forced the priestly hierarchy to deal with him, and the Romans must have had a problem legally executing him when he had broken no Roman law’.

Instead of offering his own solution to the puzzle, Haley turns the issue around and suggests that, precisely because this outcome was puzzling, Jesus may not have considered it in his strategic planning or, if he did so, would not have thought it very likely. He proposes that we place ourselves in Jesus’ position prior to his arrest and strategically examine ‘what we would gain and what we would lose by arranging to be arrested’, with our gains and losses estimated ‘in terms of the probabilities in a situation where the outcome was uncertain’. The most probable outcomes, in the order in which they were most likely to happen, are these:

1. Faced with no adequate witnesses and a silent victim, the Sanhedrin would be forced to release Jesus for lack of evidence. He would prove the impotence of the religious establishment in the face of his movement and of his aggressive statements and his physical assault on the temple.
2. The Sanhedrin might, in exasperation, break their own laws and condemn him even without evidence. They would take him to the Roman governor for execution. Since he had been careful to break no Roman law, the governor would order him released and at most scourge him. He would have discredited the temple hierarchy and proven its impotence, and he would be released as a leader who could openly oppose the temple and be tolerated by Rome.
3. By chance, and therefore it could not be predicted, the unexpected might happen and Pilate would put the decision up to the crowd. With the following Jesus had built, he would be freed by the populace and triumphantly lead a popular movement which could not be defeated by the temple hierarchy.
4. The Sanhedrin might convict him illegally, Pilate might turn to the crowd, and the crowd might call for his death. This seems the least likely possibility. Yet, if the gospel accounts are to be believed, this is what actually happened.
This being the case, Haley concludes:

It would seem possible to interpret the execution of Jesus as the result of a miscalculation on his part. Who could have guessed the Sanhedrin would condemn him without evidence, that Pilate would happen to ask the crowd for a decision, and that the crowd [Jesus] had never wronged would ask for his death? Even a master tactician cannot take into account all the possibilities, including chance occurrences.

Thus, the very fact that the crowd’s demand for Jesus’ death is so puzzling is grounds for believing that Jesus did not consider this outcome in his strategic planning, or, if he considered it, did not think it very likely.

If Jesus made a fateful miscalculation, Haley suggests that the reason for this may be discovered by examining his life more carefully. When we do so, we recognize that ‘it would fit his character to move prematurely to gain the whole world. All the evidence indicates that Jesus was a man with a passion to determine what was to happen in his environment’. The ultimate resistance to him resided in Jerusalem, the seat of religious and political power, and he chose that place for what was to be his final struggle for power. His arrest occurred at a place and time of his own choosing. It was provoked by his actions and therefore determined by them. After his arrest, he behaved in such a way that his opponents were incapacitated and forced to respond to his terms. What else could they do but to release him, allowing him to walk out a free man, exonerated of all charges against him, and proclaiming victory before the massive crowd that was gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration?

His basic miscalculation was his failure to factor into his strategic planning ‘the desperation of his opposition’ when he forced them into a corner. They could not legally condemn him, but neither could they release him without seriously damaging their power and control. By leaving them no graceful way out, he created a situation where what happened was beyond his control. Invoking his cry from the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mt. 27.46), Haley also implies that a related factor in Jesus’ miscalculation was that he believed his heavenly Father would surely not allow the situation to get out of control. Moreover, even those who argue that he deliberately sought his execution, a view that Haley discounts, ‘support the argument that Jesus was determined to control whatever happened to him’. Until this final and fateful miscalculation, he had succeeded brilliantly in this regard.

Haley concludes his analysis of Jesus’ power tactics, however, by noting that even though it appears that his plans failed on those last days, there was still the fact that he had built an organization, and in this he did not fail. In fact, the very act of being executed extended his control from beyond the grave. Haley does not consider whether this may have played a part in Jesus’ calculation, but he does suggest that this extension of his control from beyond the grave ‘fits the character of a man who would finally say, “All power is given unto me on heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28.18)’.
The Tactical Displacement of the Father

I will now take up two issues in Haley’s portrait of Jesus as power tactician. The first concerns an implication of his view that all organizations are hierarchical: If Jesus created an organization that placed the heavenly Father at the top of the hierarchy, the primary target of this organization is the human father, the person who held the top position in the human family.

For Haley, a key element in Jesus’ recruitment of the men who would form the core of his movement was that he ‘asked of them what is now typically asked of any small revolutionary cadre. They had to give up everything related to ambition in the society as it was and abandon all other commitments to others, including family ties, when they joined him’. He adds, ‘Once they have done this, it is difficult for them to defect and abandon the movement; they have sacrificed too much and have no place to go.’

If we were in Jesus’ position, and wanted to have clear evidence that a young man has in fact ‘given up all ambitions in the society as it is’ and has ‘abandoned all other commitments to others’, where would we look for it? Quite simply, in the young man’s severance of his ties with his father. Why is the tie to the father so important? Because a young man’s father would hold the key to his ambitions in the existing society. A Jewish father had five principal responsibilities toward his son: to circumcise him, redeem him, teach him Torah, teach him a trade, and find him a wife. By pledging himself to Jesus and his movement, a young man renounced or set aside these paternal blessings. In addition, a son’s social position was determined by his father’s position and the promise and bestowal of a portion of his property. In return, the son would be expected to fulfill certain obligations to his father, such as working for him, marrying the daughter of a man of use to his father’s own ambitions, and so forth.

If we were in Jesus’ place, we would want concrete, indisputable evidence that a recruit had broken his emotional and legal ties to his father. He would be expected to make a clear, irrevocable choice: Either his human father and all that this represents, or the heavenly Father and all that this implies: ‘No one can serve two masters. Either he hates the one and loves the other, or he is loyal to the one and despises the other’ (Mt. 6.24; Lk. 16.13). The importance of breaking both legal and emotional ties to one’s father is expressed in the most stark and uncompromising terms in Jesus’ response to the son who agreed to follow him but proposed to attend to his father’s burial first: ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God’ (Lk. 9.59-60; also Mt. 8.21-22). The implication is not merely that others can see to the care of the dead, but that if he cannot treat as ‘dead’ his claims on his father, and obligations to him, he is not yet ready to join Jesus’ organization. Haley’s view that power and control can be exercised from beyond the grave is especially relevant here.
An illustration of sons who were ready to sacrifice the claims and obligations of the father-son relationship is the story in Mk 1.19-20, where Jesus sees ‘James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets’. When he called them, ‘they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him’. Whether authentic or not, this story indicates that it was the father-son relationship that Jesus required his men to sacrifice. In leaving their father, they abandoned their claims to property—symbolized by the boat—that would be theirs on their father’s death. The hired men, who received wages rather than a paternal legacy, remained with Zebedee.

Later, the brothers demonstrate that they have in fact transferred their ambitions and commitments associated with their father Zebedee’s world to the world in which the heavenly Father is the highest authority. This is indicated in the story of their request to be placed immediately to Jesus’ right and left in the kingdom of the Father (Mk 10.35). Matthew’s account of the same episode (20.20-28) adds a wrinkle to the story that, even if more imaginative than factual, underlines the point that it was the severing of the son’s relationship to his father that proved he was ready to join Jesus’ organization. This is Matthew’s suggestion that it was ‘the mother of the sons of Zebedee’ who ‘came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him’ (v. 20). That it was their mother, not their father, who asked this favor indicates that breaking the tie to the father was the essential thing. Jesus tolerated, possibly even welcomed, the son’s continuing tie to his mother, as she may well have encouraged her son to join the organization, thus subverting the father’s authority over his son. Thus, Jesus—the skillful tactician—may have used the mother-son relationship to his advantage.

John Dominic Crossan’s discussion in The Historical Jesus (1991) under the heading, ‘Against the Patriarchal Family’, is relevant in this regard.10 While he wants to argue that Jesus’ pronouncements on family issues reflect his ‘social egalitarianism’, in which women are fully included, his citation of the various relevant texts makes clear that the central feature of these pronouncements was the breaking of the filial tie between son and father. For example, Crossan cites the Gospel of Thomas versions of two narratives that also appear, respectively, in Lk. 14.25-26 and Mk 3.31-35. The first reads: ‘A woman from the crowd said to him, “Blessed are the womb which bore you and the breasts which suckled you”. He said to [her], “Blessed are those who have heard the word of the father and have truly kept it”’ (Thom. 79.1-2). The second reads, ‘The disciples said to him, “Your brothers and your mother are standing outside”. He said to them, “Those here who do the will of my father are my brothers and my mother. It is they who will enter the kingdom of my father”’ (Thom. 99). In the first case, Luke has ‘the

word of God’ rather than ‘the word of the father’, and in the second case, Mark has ‘the kingdom of God’ instead of ‘the kingdom of my father’. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas makes explicit what the other gospels obscure, that in these narratives where family relations are paramount, Jesus emphasizes the word and kingdom of the heavenly Father.

Crossan notes that what the text in Mark and parallel text in Thomas both agree upon is ‘excluding the father’. But then he adds: ‘This exclusion might be interpreted in many ways: Joseph was busy that day, was already dead, or was omitted to protect either the virgin birth or God as Jesus’ true father’. Therefore, Crossan wants to emphasize ‘less the father’s exclusion than the mother’s inclusion’. Even so, he goes on to say that ‘however we explain the literal absence of Jesus’ father, his new metaphorical family lacks one as well’. Thus, even though his point is that women were to be included in the kingdom, these texts actually emphasize the exclusion of the human father and the central prominence of the heavenly Father. Gospel of Thomas 16, a variant form of Mt. 10.34-36, makes this unmistakably clear: ‘Jesus said, “Men think, perhaps, that it is peace which I have come to cast upon the world. They do not know that it is dissension which I have come to cast upon the earth: fire, sword, and war. For there will be five in a house: three will be against two, and two against three, the father against the son, and the son against the father. And they will stand solitary”’ (my emphasis). Crossan claims that this single example—‘the dominant male one’—obscures the point of the saying, that is, that the split is not only between the generations but also across genders. But the fact that the ‘dominant male’ division is the single example cited must certainly reflect the fact that this is the one with which Jesus and his closest cohorts were most concerned. Either a man serves his human father or his heavenly Father. No man can serve two masters.

The variant form of this statement in Matthew makes the same point: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household’ (my emphasis). Crossan cites Bruce Malina’s astute observation that there is no mention of the son-in-law, since it was the new wife who moved into her husband’s house, not the husband who moved into the wife’s house. But, again, this obscures the basic point that the central division will be between son and father, and father and son, and that other divisions will follow from this one. It may also be noted that an even more conspicuously absent relationship here than that of the son-in-law is the one between a man and his mother. This makes the division between the son and his father all the more striking.

Crossan concludes that it is ‘the normalcy of familial hierarchy that is under attack’ and that Jesus threatens to ‘tear the hierarchal or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination’. But following Haley’s argument...
that all organizations are necessarily hierarchical, Jesus’ attack on the hierarchi-
cal family does not mean that he replaces this hierarchy with an ‘egalitarian’ form
of organization. Rather, what the kingdom is fundamentally about is the displace-
ment of the father—paternal authority and power—by establishing the heavenly
Father at the top of the hierarchy. If Jesus does not emphasize that he has also
come to set a man against his mother, this is less because he is interested in the
inclusion of women in his organization than because he recognizes that the son-
mother alliance is one means by which the power of the father has traditionally
been effectively undermined.

In fact, Crossan provides evidence that supports this very point. In his chapter
on ‘Bandit and Messiah’, he cites Josephus’s account of ‘a somewhat paradigm-
atic encounter in Galilee between Herod the not yet Great and the bandit chief
Ezekias’ shortly after Herod was appointed ruler of Galilee in 48 BCE by his
father Antipater, prime minister under Hyrcanus II. Herod caught Ezekias and
put him and many of his brigands to death. When he was accused by ‘a number
of malicious persons at court’ for having killed people without trial ‘in violation
of Jewish law’, Hyrcanus acquitted him on orders from the Syrian legate, for the
brigands were ravaging the district on the Syrian frontier. But the episode
angered Hyracanus because it underscored his political weakness, and his ‘anger
was further kindled by the mothers of the men who had been murdered by
Herod, for every day in the temple they kept begging the people to have Herod
brought to judgment in the Synhedrion for what he had done’.11 Crossan views
this appeal by the mothers as evidence that Ezekias had great popular support. It
also suggests that this support was especially strong among the murdered men’s
mothers. We might ask: Where were the fathers of the murdered men? Why did
they not come forward?

A parable often used to make the case that, for Jesus, the human father is a
figure for the heavenly Father, is that of the two sons (Lk. 18.1-18). In Jesus at
Thirty, John W. Miller claims that ‘a strong, fatherly-type man is a recurrent
figure in the forty or so stories’ that Jesus told, and cites in this regard ‘that unfor-
gettable graciously father in the story of the prodigal son and his upright elder
brother’.12 While noting that several of the men who play the leading role in
these parables ‘are not of especially good character’, nonetheless, ‘the dominant
figures in the great majority of Jesus’ stories are fatherly types in positions of
responsibility who are shown executing these responsibilities in forceful, compe-
tent, but often surprisingly gracious ways’. Miller believes that Jesus could not
‘have spoken of fathers and the father-child relationship so often and in such
utterly realistic yet positive terms, had he not had a deeply meaningful
experience somewhere along the way with his own personal father’.

12. John W. Miller, Jesus at Thirty: A Psychological and Historical Portrait (Minne-
Miller also points to several individual sayings, besides the stories, where ‘fathers are explicitly referred to and instruction given regarding them’. One is Jesus’ citation of the command to honor father and mother in his reply to a young man who asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life (Mk 10.19 and parallels in Mt. 19.19 and Lk. 18.20). Another is his critique of the practice among the rabbinic elite whereby a son could avoid financial obligations to his father or mother by dedicating the support he owed them to the temple instead (Mk 7.9-13). He acknowledges Jesus’ saying in Lk. 14.26 (also Mt. 10.37) that one’s father, all other relations, and even life itself, must be ‘hated’, but suggests that Jesus enjoins such hate if this would prevent someone from becoming his disciple. He cites the ‘most sharply formulated saying of this type’, Jesus’ ‘leave the dead to bury the dead’ saying, but claims that, ‘At issue, perhaps, was his [i.e. Jesus’] treasured new-found experience of God as gracious father, devotion to whose will (as this was unfolding through his mission) takes priority over everything else.’ He adds, ‘A moving testimony to the depth of his faith in this regard is his beautifully off-hand statement about the greater goodness of God as father compared to the flawed goodness of human fathers.’ Miller has reference here to Mt. 7.9-11 (with a parallel in Lk. 11.11-13): ‘Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!’

In my view, Miller’s effort to portray Jesus as a religious leader who held human fathers in high esteem is fundamentally misguided. The first two sayings that he adduces in support of his view that Jesus’ attitude toward human fathers was ‘unusually positive’ may be accounted for by Haley’s point that Jesus insisted that the ideas he was presenting were not deviations from the established religion but a truer expression of them. Thus, to the young man’s question about what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus cited, among others, the commandment to honor his father and mother (Exod. 20.12; Deut. 5.16). In the discussion of the son’s financial obligations to his father and mother, he opposed the diverting of these monies to the temple instead. Both responses reflect Haley’s point that revolutionary leaders need to ‘define what they do as orthodox while making the changes necessary to establish a power position’. Moreover, since Jesus positioned himself against the temple establishment, he invoked the tradition against its recent innovations.

Miller’s interpretation of the ‘hatred’ saying introduces the very sort of qualifications that Jesus would have considered evidence that the speaker was not yet ready to join his movement. His suggestion that Jesus is merely saying that one must ‘hate’ a family member if, otherwise, he would be unable to commit himself to Jesus’ movement is, in fact, directly countered by the ‘let the dead bury the dead’ saying, which makes very clear that one cannot have it both ways:
Either your loyalty is to your father or to the heavenly Father. There is no middle ground on which to stand. In contrast, Miller introduces another qualification, that of priorities. Whereas Jesus is demanding an absolute commitment, one where there is no turning back, for the recruit has burned his bridges behind him, Miller suggests that Jesus made this harsh-sounding comment because of his own experience of God as a gracious father, ‘devotion to whose will…takes priority over everything else’ (my emphasis). A leader cannot depend on a member of his organization who merely promises that devotion to the head of the organization—in this case, the heavenly Father—will ‘take priority’ over all the other persons to whom he is also devoted. Such an arrangement is simply unacceptable. Had the son in this story agreed to Jesus’ terms and not gone off to bury his father, he would then have met the critical test for membership in Jesus’ organization.

As for Miller’s interpretation of the saying, supported by examples, about fathers who give good gifts to their children, Jesus does make a comparison between the heavenly Father and earthly fathers. But this is not a comparison between the ‘flawed goodness’ of the one and the ‘greater goodness’ of the other, but between ‘evil’ fathers and the ‘good’ heavenly Father. As Haley indicates, the leader of a revolutionary movement must promise rewards in return for the sacrifices he requires, and the rewards must be of such magnitude that the things that have been sacrificed pale in comparison. There is an implied disparagement if not ridicule in Jesus’ examples of the father who gives bread and fish, not stone and serpent, in response to his son’s entreaties. Since giving a stone or serpent would be downright perverse, the father’s gift of bread and fish is better than the hypothetical alternatives. But giving his son exactly what the son requests can hardly be compared with the manner in which the heavenly Father gives gifts, or with the magnificence of the gifts themselves. Jesus promised his men that they would one day be rulers with him in the kingdom of the Father. For this, they were willing to sacrifice whatever ‘gifts’ they might receive from their earthly fathers, gifts that, in any case, have strings attached.

In short, Jesus’ tactical displacement of the human father both supports and gives concreteness to Haley’s point that, in joining Jesus’ organization, a young man would be giving up ‘everything related to ambition in the society as it was and abandon all other commitments to others’ (p. 30). The requisite evidence that such a sacrifice had been made is that a man had severed emotional and legal ties to his father. In stark contrast to their father Zebedee, who fishes for fish, James and John will ‘fish for people’ (Mk 1.16). As Haley puts it, in exchange for this sacrifice, the leader ‘gives them a sense of mission and purpose in life’. In turn, he places ‘his hopes in the young who do not yet have an investment in the establishment, and he deliberately incites the young against their elders, to break the family ties that solidify the strength of the establishment’. What is perhaps most remarkable about Jesus in this regard is his candor: ‘Do not think that
I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. *I have come to set a man against his father*’ (Mt. 10.34, my emphasis). A leader could not be any more explicit than this.

**Did Jesus Miscalculate?**

The second issue I want to consider is Haley’s argument that Jesus made a fateful miscalculation as far as the outcome of his trial was concerned, and that this miscalculation provides a glimpse into Jesus’ character, the fact that he was ‘a man with a passion to determine what was to happen in his environment’ (p. 50).

In one sense, Haley seems to want to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt. If, hypothetically, we were in Jesus’ position and were examining what we might gain or lose by arranging to be arrested, ‘Our gains and losses would be estimated in terms of the probabilities in a situation where the outcome was uncertain.’ This being the case, we would know that we were taking a risk, and that in this case we were risking our very lives. In other words, being the skillful strategist he had proven himself to be, Jesus surely calculated the risks involved and acted on the basis of this calculation. In addition, skillful as he was, Jesus could not have foreseen that the least probable of all the possibilities would in fact occur: ‘Even a master tactician cannot take into account all the possibilities, including chance occurrences.’ The factor of ‘chance occurrences’ is well known to military strategists.

On the other hand, Haley is critical of Jesus, for he also claims that ‘it would fit his character to move prematurely to gain the whole world’. The fault, then, lies not with Jesus’ tactical prowess but in a more deeply rooted personality or character trait, ‘a man with a passion to determine what was to happen in his environment’. This passion caused him to act precipitously, or to seek to force events to bend to his will rather than waiting patiently for the opportunity or propitious moment to act. His impatience with Peter’s objections, which were probably shared by others in Jesus’ organization, to his decision to go down to Jerusalem at this time (Mt. 16.21-23) appears to give evidence of this personality trait.

Haley’s view that Jesus was a man of passion who might act precipitously, however, requires careful examination. In my judgment, it is not self-evidently true. In order to assess its accuracy, we need to locate this alleged personality trait in the context of the final days of Jesus’ life. While efforts to reconstruct what happened have not led to a consensus opinion, a consideration of two scholars’ attempts to reconstruct what happened after his disturbance in the temple provides a perspective from which to assess Haley’s view that Jesus made a fateful miscalculation that was due, in effect, to a personality trait, namely, a tendency to act precipitously, that worked against his tactical acumen.
Crossan’s Reconstruction

Crossan believes that Jesus would have been arrested on the spot for his disturbance in the temple, and would have been executed without a trial. In his view, Jesus’ symbolic destruction of the temple ‘simply actualized what he had already said in his teachings, effected in his healings, and realized in his mission of open commensality’.13 (Commensality is Crossan’s term for Jesus’ use of table fellowship to break down society’s vertical hierarchy and lateral separations.) But, while there was nothing new or surprising in Jesus’ action, ‘the confined and tinderbox atmosphere of the Temple at Passover, especially under Pilate, was not the same as the atmosphere in the rural reaches of Galilee, even under Antipas, and the soldiers moved in immediately to arrest him’. Immediate arrest and execution, without the formalities of a trial, would be entirely consistent with the fact that brutal crowd control was Pilate’s specialty. That he would release any prisoner during the Passover festival is also ‘against any administrative wisdom’. A decent governor could postpone an execution until after the festival, or allow burial of the crucified by his family, but there is no evidence to suggest that Pilate was anything but a ruthless governor who acted first, and asked questions later. Thus, the narrative in Mk 15.6-15 about Pilate throwing the matter up to a clamorous crowd, is ‘absolutely unhistorical, a creation most likely of Mark himself’. The very idea of Pilate ‘meekly acquiescing’ to a crowd stirred up by the chief priests would itself be utterly contrary to his brutal crowd control, which was the reason for his arrest and execution of Jesus in the first place.

Assuming that the followers of Jesus dispersed after his arrest and went into hiding, Crossan is also very suspicious of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, death (including what he allegedly said from the cross) and burial. If none of them were there, ‘How did Jesus’ first followers know so much about his death and burial? How did they know those almost hour-by-hour details given in fairly close and remarkable agreement by all four New Testament gospels and by the Gospel of Peter outside the New Testament?’ What we have in these accounts is not ‘history remembered’ but ‘prophecy historicized’ (his emphases). He concludes:

My best historical reconstruction of what actually happened is that Jesus was arrested during the Passover festival and those closest to him fled for their own safety. I do not presume at all any high-level consultations between Caiaphus or Pilate about or with Jesus. They would no doubt have agreed before such a festival that fast and immediate action was to be taken against any disturbance and that some examples by crucifixion might be especially useful at the start.

Furthermore, ‘I doubt very much if Jewish police and Roman soldiery needed to go too far up the chain of command in handling a Galilean peasant like Jesus.’ It is we who have trouble bringing our imagination down low enough ‘to see the casual brutality with which he was probably taken and executed’.

If one accepts this view of what happened, a host of questions follow, such as whether Jesus was aware that his action would provoke his arrest and summary execution—without trial—and, if so, what would be his motivation for arranging his almost certain death? In The Historical Jesus, Crossan says he doubts ‘that poor Galilean peasants went up and down regularly to the Temple feasts. I think it quite possible that Jesus went to Jerusalem only once and that the spiritual and economic egalitarianism he preached in Galilee exploded in indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was nonegalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and the political level’.14 In Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, he notes that ‘What would happen to Jesus was probably as predictable as what had happened already to John. Some form of religiopolitical execution could surely have been expected’, and his symbolic destruction of the Temple, in the volatile atmosphere of Passover, ‘would have been quite enough to entail crucifixion by religiopolitical agreement’.15

These statements suggest that Jesus knew that he was likely to die a violent death, that he had always lived with the possibility of arrest, and that his action in the temple may have been prompted by some combination of a longstanding hatred of what the temple stood for and an unpremeditated emotional reaction when he actually set foot on the temple grounds. If this is a reasonably accurate summary of Crossan’s views, derived from two different sources, it leads to the conclusion that Jesus probably did not miscalculate. Even if he did, the miscalculation would not have been that he thought he could get arrested and then be acquitted, thus winning the power struggle with the establishment, but that he had not calculated upon the likelihood that his action in the temple would lead to his immediate arrest. In this case, the miscalculation would have been due to his having previously got away with similar provocative actions in Galilee without being arrested. Even this miscalculation, however, would not be very likely.

As Pilate governed from 26–36 CE, and Josephus recounts episodes in which his soldiers acted brutally at his request well before Jesus’ execution, we may assume that Jesus would not have been surprised that his ‘explosion of indignation’ at the temple would provoke such brutality. If his disciples sought to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem in the first place, and apparently none participated in the action that resulted in his arrest, we may further assume that Jesus knew the risks involved and acted anyway.

15. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 196.
While Crossan’s reconstruction of the arrest and execution call into question Haley’s view that Jesus made a fateful miscalculation, they do not undermine his portrayal of Jesus as a man who was oriented toward power and used it skillfully. In his discussion of Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Crossan admits there are problems with ‘the word *kingdom* as a translation of the Greek word *basilea*’, but what we are actually talking about…is *power and rule*, a process much more than a place, a way of life much more than a location on earth… The focus of discussion is not on kings but on rulers, not on kingdom but on power, not on place but on process. The Kingdom of God is what the world would be if God were directly and immediately in charge.16

If the kingdom of the heavenly Father is about power and process, not place, then Jesus’ power tactics exemplified the way of life that Jesus both envisioned and actualized. After all, the kingdom is about the empowerment of those who, by necessity or choice, are outside or alien to the religiopolitical establishment.

**Sanders’ Reconstruction**

If Crossan believes that there was no trial before the execution of Jesus, there are many biblical scholars who disagree. In *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, E.P. Sanders notes that it was the responsibility of the high priest to maintain good order in Judaea in general, and in Jerusalem in particular. Since Caiaphus served longer than any other high priest during periods of direct Roman rule, this is evidence that he was very capable in this regard: ‘If the high priest did not preserve order, the Roman prefect would intervene militarily, and the situation might get out of hand.’17 But, ‘as long as the Temple guards, acting as the high priest’s police, carried out arrests, and as long as the high priest was involved in judging cases (though he could not execute anyone), there was relatively little possibility of a direct clash between Jews and Roman troops’.

Sanders cites an episode which occurred about thirty years after Jesus was executed in which another Jesus, the son of Ananias, went to the temple during the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) and proclaimed the destruction of Jerusalem and the sanctuary. This action led to his being interrogated and flogged, first by the Jewish authorities, then by the Romans. He answered questions by reiterating his dirge over the city, and was finally released as a maniac. Sanders uses this case to explain why Jesus was executed rather than merely flogged. To him, the offense of Jesus of Nazareth was much worse. He had a following, perhaps not

17. E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993). Quotations are from pp. 265-76.
very large, but a following nonetheless. He had taught about the kingdom for some time. He had employed physical action in the temple. He was not a madman. For these reasons, he was politically dangerous: ‘Conceivably he could have talked his way out of execution had he promised to take his disciples, return to Galilee, and keep his mouth shut. He seems not to have tried.’

Sanders believes that Caiaphus was primarily or exclusively concerned with the possibility that Jesus would incite a riot. He had Jesus arrested, gave him a hearing, and recommended execution to Pilate, who promptly complied. The blasphemy charge against Jesus was a smokescreen for the real issue, which was that ‘Jesus threatened the Temple and gave himself airs. The high priest had him arrested because of his action against the Temple, and that was the charge against him. The testimony was thrown out of court because the witnesses did not say the same things. The high priest, however, had decided that Jesus had to die, and so he was not willing to drop the case’ (his emphasis). Whatever Jesus replied in response to the high priest’s question as to whether he considered himself the Messiah would not have mattered: ‘We do not have to decide whether Jesus answered “yes” or “maybe”. The high priest had already made up his mind.’

Why did Pilate order Jesus’ execution? Because the high priest had recommended it and had charged that Jesus thought he was the king of the Jews. It is doubtful that Pilate thought Jesus was a serious threat for he had no army, so he made no effort to track down and execute his followers. But he probably considered him a religious fanatic ‘whose fanaticism had become so extreme that it posed a threat to law and order’. In all probability, he received Caiaphus’s charge, ‘had Jesus flogged and briefly interrogated, and, when the answers were not completely satisfactory, sent him to the cross without a second thought’. That he put the matter to the clamoring crowd is more than doubtful; this story derives from the desire of the early Christians to get along with Rome and to depict Jews as their real opponents. That Pilate probably ordered the execution without a trial is supported by an appeal that his contemporary, Philo, wrote to the emperor Gaius (Caligula). Among other injustices, this appeal cited ‘the executions without trial’ that marked Pilate’s rule.

This version of the trial supports Haley’s view that the most improbable of all the likely outcomes of Jesus’ ‘audacious attack’ on the temple would be Pilate’s decision to let the crowd decide. In the end, Haley nonetheless accepted the Gospel account while Sanders does not. But if Sanders is correct, then Haley’s assumptions that the Sanhedrin would not violate its own laws (option 1) or, if it did, no Roman governor would execute Jesus without sufficient evidence (option 2) are simply incorrect; in which case options 3 (the crowd clamoring for his release) and 4 (the crowd calling for his death) are irrelevant. Sanders’s view that it didn’t matter much what Jesus may have replied to the high priest also casts doubt on Haley’s view that, by remaining silent, Jesus made it impossible for the Sanhedrin to convict him. Also, Sanders seems to entertain the possibility,
however remote, that Jesus might have avoided execution had he been more forthcoming with Pilate, whereas Haley believes that his refusal to speak deprived Pilate of cause to execute him.

On the other hand, Sanders’s reconstruction of the trial and execution supports Haley’s conclusion that Jesus at last found himself in a situation where what happened was beyond his control. But his explanation for this is not that he ‘miscalculated the desperateness of his opposition’, as Haley suggests, but that he knew his only realistic hope would be divine intervention. Thus, in Sanders’s view, it is ‘highly probable that Jesus knew he was a marked man’. Conceivably, he may have thought ‘that God would intervene before he was arrested and executed’, but, ‘In any case he did not flee. He went to the Mount of Olives to pray and to wait—to wait for the reaction of the authorities and possibly the intervention of God.’ The garden of Gethsemane prayer attributed to him (Mk 14.32-42; Mt. 26; 36–46; Lk. 22.40-46), although represented as private, is ‘perfectly reasonable’, for it suggests that he not only prayed to be spared and hoped he would not die, but also resigned himself to the will of his Father. This would be thoroughly consistent with everything that he had taught regarding the absolute commitment of his organization, and members within it, to the heavenly Father.

Sanders also considers it ‘possible that, when Jesus drank his last cup of wine [at the Passover meal] and predicted that he would drink it again in the kingdom, he thought that the kingdom would arrive immediately’. If so, the cry attributed to him from the cross from Psalm 22.1, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Mk 15.34) may well have been ‘his own reminiscence of the psalm, not just a motif inserted by the early Christians’. In which case, he ‘may have died disappointed’. This, too, supports Haley’s view that Jesus had at last found himself in a situation where what happened was beyond his control.

In short, whether Haley’s views regarding the trial and execution of Jesus are credible depends, in part, on which biblical scholar is considered to have put forward the most compelling reconstruction of what Jesus did and what happened to him in Jerusalem. While Crossan and Sanders agree that it was the temple disturbance that precipitated Jesus’ arrest, and that he intended his actions there as a ‘symbolic destruction’ of the temple, and not merely an objection to its business practices, they agree on little else. Still, their reconstructions suggest that, in acting as he did at the temple grounds, Jesus had knowingly behaved in a manner that precluded his retaining control of the situation from that time forward. He had, quite self-consciously, placed his fate in the hands of his heavenly Father. If so, the saying attributed to him from the cross—‘It is finished’ (Jn 19.30)—expresses what he may have thought or felt following his ‘audacious attack’ on the temple. As he had not built an organization of militia fighters, he must have been aware that this attack on the temple was the culminating act of his career as a prophet of Israel. After this action, nothing from then on would be the same.
Both Sanders and Crossan agree that it was not the size of Jesus’ following that caused the authorities to consider him a political threat. Rather, it was the fear that he could incite a crowd to riot. But this is to view his threat from a purely sociopolitical perspective. Haley’s analysis of Jesus’ power tactics suggests a psychological element as well. If one accepts Sanders’s view that Jesus was accorded some sort of audience before the high priest and members of his council, this would mean that for the first time in his life, Jesus was face-to-face with the highest religious authorities in Israel. He was no longer dealing with their proxies in Galilee. What happened in this face-to-face encounter is a matter of conjecture, but Haley’s view that Jesus was especially skillful in ‘putting his critics in their places and never using defensive behavior’ must have been impressed upon this group of men as well. As its direct targets, they would not have taken kindly to it. What they had that the religious authorities in Galilee did not have was the power to recommend his execution to Pilate, and thereby wash their hands of a man who threatened their authority.

Following the Synoptic gospel accounts, Haley believes that Jesus remained silent and noncommittal, his strategy being that he would not say anything that would incriminate him. However, it would be more consistent with his general portrait of Jesus to suggest that Jesus’ demeanor before the high priest and members of his council was no different from his rhetorical tactics against his opponents and detractors in Galilee. Had Haley not been warned, perhaps by his reading of Schweitzer’s *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, to avoid the Gospel of John, he might have made this very point. According to John, Jesus did not remain silent during the interrogation conducted by the high priest. In John’s version, Jesus responded to the high priest’s questions about his disciples and teaching, ‘I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said’ (18.20-21). Whereupon one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’, to which Jesus responded, ‘If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?’ (18.22-23).

Thus, in John’s version, Jesus did not alter his usual tactics at all. To be sure, he did not respond directly to the questions put to him, but his ‘non-response’ was not one of silence. Rather, he told the high priest that he should not rely on the testimony of the accused but on that of eyewitnesses, of whom there were many, as he had acted publicly, not conspired in secrecy. This response, of course, was viewed as one of insolence and lack of deference toward the high priest. If Sanders speculates on what Jesus could have said to ‘talk his way out of execution’, a more intriguing question, in my view, is what he may actually have said to talk his way into it.
In any event, if Haley had been less impressed by Lorenz’s analogy of the wolf whose acceptance of defeat incapacitates his more powerful opponent, together with its parallel in Josephus’s account of the mob of protesters, and had instead applied to Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem his earlier account of the alcoholic who says to the bartender, ‘If you want me out of here, throw me out’, he might not have claimed that Jesus miscalculated, and did so on account of his alleged tendency to act precipitously. In fact, the story of the alcoholic would have enabled him to claim that Jesus was in fact ‘the one who determined what was to happen’ through to the very end. This conclusion, which is the one that makes most sense to me on the basis of Haley’s own contention that Jesus was a master tactician, casts doubt on Sanders’s view that Jesus expected his heavenly Father to intervene at the last minute, and underscores Haley’s related observation that it is even possible to determine what is going to happen from beyond the grave, as events have borne out.

In the surrender tactic, one extends one’s neck, and allows the victor to make the final determination, that is, to dishonor himself by going for the jugular or to dignify himself by allowing the vanquished to get up and walk away. In the parable of the alcoholic, one refuses to leave the premises when ordered to do so. The alcoholic declares, ‘I will not go peacefully. If you want me out of here, you will have to throw me out bodily.’ This is a very different power dynamic, and one that is congruent with the temple disturbance, Jesus’ last symbolic action. If Jesus told his disciples that he was sending them out among wolves, he must also have known that the surrender tactic can only work if there is honor among wolves or that there exists a plausible threat of retaliation against the wolf who takes unfair advantage of the other wolf’s act of surrender. Absent these assumptions, one must be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove (Mt. 10.16). Because he exhibits both simultaneously, the alcoholic who has become a disruptive nuisance in another man’s tavern ‘determines the outcome of the interchange’.

18. Haley, ‘The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ’, p. 37. I assume that it is unnecessary to point out to readers of this journal that, according to various Gospel accounts, Jesus, unlike John, was no stranger to the local tavern scene.
‘HOW I STOPPED WORRYING ABOUT MEL GIBSON AND LEARNED TO LOVE THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS’:
A REVIEW OF MEL GIBSON’S THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

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ABSTRACT

The Passion of the Christ by Mel Gibson has proven to be a mass-cultural phenomenon. This article compares it with the recent film The Gospel of John and then evaluates the film under three rubrics: (1) artistic and religious merit, (2) historical accuracy, and (3) anti-Semitism. The relationship between these two films and the problem of the historical Jesus is investigated.

Key Words: The Passion of the Christ, Mel Gibson, The Gospel of John, historical accuracy, anti-Semitism, historical Jesus, Isaiah 53

Like most who have seen The Passion of the Christ, I left the theater with an array of complicated responses and complex feelings. I want to explore these under three rubrics: (1) artistic and religious merit, (2) historical accuracy, and (3) anti-Semitism. In conclusion I would like to propose a new resolve for finding the historical Jesus as an antidote to the Hollywood Jesus.

Artistic and Religious Merit

I am not a fan of this film. But I want to start out by saying that I do not impugn Mel Gibson’s right to make this film or the right of the movie-going public to see it. On the other hand, anyone who sees it has the equal right to comment on it and even offer a critique without being automatically called ‘anti-Christian’. There are some beautiful things in this film. I was particularly impressed by the portrayal of Mary, Jesus’ mother. She is the real center of the film, since all the events are filtered through her perspective. The performance of Maia Morgenstern...
as Mary, the mother of Jesus, was deeply powerful and a high point of the otherwise dismal film. A great deal has been made about her identity as an actor, as she is often described as an Israeli and the child of a Holocaust survivor. This neither indicts nor exonerates the film from the charge of anti-Semitism. That she happens to be Jewish is as wonderful a coincidence as is the fact that she also happens to have a name, Morgenstern, that signifies the *stella maris*, a traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary.¹

I also appreciate the deep Catholic spirituality in the film. I have myself walked the Stations of the Cross on two occasions, once with a person who humbled me with her deep and sincere faith. The emotions of that pilgrim’s act of piety can be found in this film as well. So I can appreciate some of the emotional depth that the film creates.

On the whole, however, I was alternately disappointed and appalled by the film. Before seeing the film, I read press reports about the film’s violence and anti-Semitism. I hate violence in films, and so I believed the press reports about it. But I expected that the press about the film’s anti-Semitism was hyped. I went to see the film as a professional responsibility. But I found that neither the violence nor the anti-Semitism was hyped. Both were amply in evidence. Unfortunately, there is little in the film to redeem it after finding both those primary qualities of the film to be true. I will leave the issue of anti-Semitism for later, and focus now on the film’s artistry.

True, when one impugns the film for moral features, the aesthetic features of the film are pretty much ruined. The spooky camera angles, the suspense and the absolutely unbearable violence are obvious conventions taken out of the action/adventure films that Mel Gibson has spent his career perfecting. It is no surprise to me that *The Passion* has garnered a hefty share of the desirable market of single-male, aged 17 to 30, audience.² Its technique is meant more to appeal to that audience just as surely as its script is meant to appeal to a legitimate Catholic spirituality. The result is an action/adventure passion play, not a Gospel, a tough-guy Jesus who can take it. The film seems to me to ask the question how much punishment can Jesus take, a theme that runs throughout Gibson’s film oeuvre. As such, questions of the historical accuracy of the film to the New Testament are moot. It would have been more honest to consider it as macho-man film meets medieval passion play.

1. Morgenstern means ‘morning star’, a reference to the planet Venus in German. The same planet can be called the *stella maris* in Latin and commonly refers to the Virgin Mary, as the Italian personal name Maristella does. Masses to Mary as the *stella maris* are a feature of Catholic Church music. I think particularly of the haunting compositions of Josquin Desprez (c. 1440–1521) who wrote a Mass for the Virgin Mary (*messe ave maris stella*) as well as a motet for the Queen of Heaven under the name ‘Ave Maris Stella’.


One might make the case that the violence in the film serves the film’s stated aim: to portray Jesus as the bruised ‘suffering servant’ of Isa. 53.5; in particular to illustrate the verse: ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities’. This is what the superscription of the film maintains. Indeed, by depicting Jesus as mutely enduring a violent beating that would have killed a normal man several times over, the film depicts that biblical passage more completely than any other has, as if to say: ‘Surely this man must be God to have superhumanly endured this beating for the remission of our sins’. The film amply reports the inhumanity of Jesus’ captors but without Maia Morgenstern it would totally miss the more important religious emotion, the more traditional emotions of grief, as a meditation on Good Friday.

This is, of course, a long-standing and important aspect of Christian piety. The depiction of the violence outgrows its theological basis and becomes a physical ordeal for the movie-goer. Anyone schooled in Christian spirituality throughout the centuries would respond to this depiction. It is valid and authentic because it is a prominent theme in medieval Christian spirituality. The question is: ‘Are the emotions earned or are they just elicited? does the film have integrity as an artistic creation?’ I submit that we cannot just excuse all violence even if it is used in service of eliciting religious emotions, just as we would not excuse a tear-jerker for its use of sentimentality. Unfortunately, the American film-going public knows how to judge the issue of maudlin sentiment better than it knows how to deal with supererogatory violence.

I am not sure it is as at home in American culture with its interests in rational cultural pluralism, but it certainly is attracting a following right now, with the Gospel’s message constantly under pressure from the secular world and with the Catholic church’s leadership under moral indictment for covering up an uncontrolled sex scandal. I am not saying that these are the only motivations for seeing the film. I assume the reasons that the film has been so popular and so liked are varied. There are multiple reasons why someone might like the film; it is, of course, affecting; the emotions raised by seeing it can be transmuted into religious sentiment at a time when even the bishops are suspect for covering up the scandal. But I cannot understand why people such as Pat Robertson, who has otherwise preached for removing violence and sexuality from film, are now recommending that parents take their thirteen-year-old children to see it.3

Summarizing its artistic merit, I would say that it attempts to portray a basically Catholic spirituality which is affecting and interesting and valuable in itself

3. See his interview on the show ‘Hannity and Colmes’ of the Fox Cable Television network in the week that The Passion opened. Hannity and Robertson both stated that it would be appropriate for a thirteen year old to see the film (with a parent, of course, since it has an R rating). The Fox Network has been an especially strong proponent of the film; the parent company will produce the DVD.
but its excessive violence and its misleading claims to historical accuracy, as well as the anti-Jewish content that mar that portrayal beyond redemption for me.

### Historical Accuracy

But is this historically accurate to the New Testament? The New Testament surely proclaims that Jesus is the martyred messiah whose death and resurrection bring salvation for all. But does it proclaim that Jesus’ suffering is the means of human salvation using Isaiah 53, as the superscription to the film states? Paul, the earliest Christian writer, believes in vicarious atonement. But neither Paul nor the Gospels use Isaiah 53 explicitly for that purpose. While Paul speaks of Jesus’ vicarious atonement as grounded in scripture, he does not reveal his text. Although Isaiah 53 is mentioned several times in the New Testament, this particular usage of the suffering servant is appropriate to the church fathers and not to the New Testament.

The use of Isaiah 53 in the New Testament is easy to trace. In Acts 8.32-33, Isaiah 53 is quoted. The Ethiopian Eunuch asks whether the passage refers to Isaiah himself, who was by then viewed as a martyr. The text both demonstrates the antiquity of the Isaianic martyr tradition and argues against that tradition to the effect that Isaiah 53 refers to the messiah, who must suffer and die. Once this is established, Philip can explain to the Ethiopian the good news of the Christ.

Matthew 8.17 uses Isa. 53.5 very literally (‘by his stripes we are healed’) to demonstrate that Jesus’ healings were prophesied. 1 Pet. 2.22 uses the passage to offer encouragement and consolation to slaves with hard masters by bidding them to identify with the suffering of Jesus. The later and very moving tradition surely begins humbly here in 1 Peter, but it is not the New Testament’s interpretation itself which has so affected Christian piety. But the later generality which the tradition has is not gained until the church fathers. So the issue is not the authenticity of the spirituality in the film but the claim that it is depicting what the New Testament tells us. The historical claim is inauthentic, though the spirituality is real enough, for a later period.

In fact, The Passion most often takes as its base text the Gospel of John.\(^4\) But using the Gospel of John makes the historicity of the traditions about Jesus even more problematic. The Gospel of John is written at the end of the first century; virtually all the sayings of Jesus in it are better understood as sermons which early Christians gave for the mission and encouragement of the community.

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\(^4\) This is both my opinion and the opinion of Father Andrew Greeley, in an interview on ‘Hard-Ball’, the Bill O’Reilly opinion show for Fox Cable News Network, 1 March 2004 and in ‘“Passion: Fails to Nail Key Point’, his column for the Chicago Sun Times, 5 March 2004. See www.suntimes.com/output/greeley/cst-edt-greel05.html.

They are important documents of that time. Some of the sermons are quite moving and others are polemical attempts to understand the friction between the church and the synagogue. But virtually every scholar agrees that they are not the actual words of Jesus. Nor does *The Passion* spend very much time on the words of Jesus in John. The effect of the sparse subtitles to the Aramaic is to present a kind of *tableau vivant*. The film does weave in incidents taken from Christian tradition and from the other Gospels but these additions are not employed to bolster the authenticity of the film’s plot-line.

Though Gibson and his fans have constantly stressed the authenticity of the film, I have found that authenticity is a very difficult goal for a film. I worked with a team of scholars to produce a film adaptation, *The Gospel of John*, for Visual Bible International (VBI), a film that attempted to be as true to the Gospel as the group could make it. Every word that was in the Gospel is in the film, and no word which is not in the Gospel has been added to the film. We attempted to interpret every scene in a neutral and historical context. Although one could legitimately argue over the translation, it is as close as one can come to depicting that Gospel on film. The costumes and the set are as close to authentic as we could make them. Even the music was designed with ancient instrumentation as its skeletal structure. In order to give a complete a picture of *The Gospel of John* on film, it needs to be three hours long. I believe it is the only attempt to bring the complete Gospel of John to the screen.

The most important bid for authenticity in Gibson’s film is the use of Aramaic and Latin, with subtitles. As we all know, however, this is not actually historical since we have no Aramaic versions of the Gospels; they are only extant in Greek. Strangely, nobody speaks Greek in the film, though it is likely that Pilate would have addressed his forces in that language, even though it is possible that they knew Aramaic, as they were likely raised in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is unlikely that Pilate could speak Aramaic with any facility. The legionnaires of Gibson’s film sometimes speak Aramaic and sometimes speak ‘street’ Latin, giving voice to words that I have only heard in medical terminology before. Even the slang Latin is unlikely if the troops were raised in Syria. At one point, Jesus and Pilate converse with each other in good church Latin, which is a miracle, actually, as it anticipates the holy language of a later time.

I spent a good deal of time listening to the Aramaic and thinking of verb paradigms to avoid watching the violence. I admit I have some pedantic Aramaic grammar and syntax corrections for the script. But the main point must be that no Aramaic can be authentic, no matter how carefully translated, since it is always a theoretical back-translation from the Greek of the New Testament or the screenplay’s English. So why not just translate the whole into English, using one of the available translations, which have long histories of scholarly scrutiny and correction? Or, ironically, it might even be authentic to the Catholic tradition portrayed in the film for everyone to speak Latin, as if to say that this *Passion* is...
based on a tradition that begins with the Vulgate and moves forward through the Latin Church tradition. That might have yielded a very different and more authentic film. If the authentic Greek is wanted, it could be played quite convincingly with a modern katharevusa pronunciation, which is close to the New Testament’s koine Greek. Using Aramaic makes the film seem historically accurate when historical accuracy to the Gospels and the historical Jesus is hardly even attempted in the film. Putting the whole film into Latin would have at least told the movie-going public that this was a traditional portrait of the Latin Church. And that would have been fine. The difficulty is that Gibson consistently argues on the airwaves that his is an accurate view of the Gospels.5

Gibson’s Passion is not only historically unauthentic, it is also replete with non-biblical elements. Unfortunately, most of the additions have anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic implications.6 And this is, unfortunately, where a rightful charge of anti-Semitism does arise. Again and again, defenders of the film have said that the depiction of Jews in it is no worse than the New Testament. I beg to differ; the New Testament should be defended against such a calumny. The film is much worse than the New Testament on the issue of anti-Semitism. Here are some of the innovations in the text: Satan tempts Jesus by asking ‘Who is your father?’ ‘No one can carry this burden of sin, I tell you’, even though Satan hardly appears in any passion narrative. The Jewish authorities arrest Jesus, though it is the Romans with the Temple guards in the Gospel of John. The Jewish soldiers (dressed, by the way, in outrageously unhistorical and supernaturally evil-looking uniforms), throw Jesus, shackled in chains off a bridge, where demonic creatures lurk below. His fall is brought up just short of the ground by the chains in one excruciating jerk. This is gratuitous and sadistic violence that has no precedent in any Gospel. What is more, the Jews exclusively are its agents in Gibson’s film. Shortly thereafter, representatives of the priests pay the crowds to assemble and to demand Jesus’ death, a detail present in no New Testament source. The Jews then shackle Jesus to a jail wall. Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus’ mother,

5. Strangely enough a number of people who worked on the film do not think so. William Fulco, Benedict Fitzgerald and Barbara Nicolosi all defend Gibson on the grounds that he does not have to be true to the gospels, as an artist. See http://ascweb.usc.edu/asc.php?page=10-110&story=200. I agree but they irrationally keep maintaining that Emmerich did not influence Gibson or the screenplay. Furthermore, Gibson maintains that he has stayed strictly true to the Gospels, especially on the Diana Sawyer interview. After a limited showing, Gibson was asked by an evangelical Christian where he got the scene with the devil suckling a demon-child. Obviously, irked by the question, Gibson replied that he had pulled the scene ‘out of his ass’. The hostile use of this slang expression to a religious person should not be missed. In a variety of different ways, this suggests little deep appreciation for the Bible.

6. See Philip A. Cunningham, Executive Director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, whose article ‘Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”, A Challenge to Catholic Teaching’, is available at www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/reviews/gibson_cunningham.htm. He adduces these additions and discusses the film in more detail.
wake up above the place where Jesus is incarcerated and speak the first of the four questions: ‘Why is this night different from all others?’ in Hebrew, present in no Gospel, but emphasizing the change of faith that is at hand, though there is no reason for them to be reciting that liturgy otherwise. It is not the right moment to recite liturgy; its purpose is theological and anti-Jewish. Mary Magdalene, who is depicted as the woman taken in adultery in John 8 (without any textual evidence), entreats the soldiers to help Jesus. They excuse themselves by saying that the Jews are trying to ‘hide their crime from you’. Jesus is physically assaulted by a crowd of Jews, many wearing prayer shawls, fringes and caps. Inexplicably, neither Jesus nor any of his disciples wear these garments, which is an obvious attempt to make Jesus appear less Jewish. Although the Pharisees are all but absent from the passion narrative, they are blamed by an aide of Pilate for the arrest. Judas is driven to suicide by Jewish children wearing caps, and who are transformed on screen into demons. Pilate sums up the Jewish abuse of Jesus by asking the priests: ‘Do you always punish your prisoners before they are judged?’ Pilate and his wife are depicted as benevolent middle-management bureaucrats who personally sympathize with Jesus but are unable to assuage the raving mob. Pilate’s wife seems almost to be converted to Christianity, as in later tradition. There is a large audience for the scourging: while Satan stirs up the crowd of Jews to encourage the scourgers, Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus’ mother and a large, sneering crowd look on, though no Gospel reports this kind of audience. Satan appears as a woman, even once with a demon child at her breast, adding anti-feminism to Gibson’s list of faults. One short verse narrating the scourging of Jesus is translated into long, long minutes of screen-time, adding all kinds of details about the legionnaires’ sadistic torture of Jesus, which is absent from the biblical text. Pilate’s wife gives linen to the two Marys, presumably for Jesus’ funeral, but they use them to soak up the pools of blood after the scourging. Although the Jews encourage the Romans, Pilate himself is shocked by the ferocity of the scouring and condemns Jesus to death reluctantly. Jesus carries an enormous cross while one of thieves taunts him: ‘Why do you embrace your cross, you fool?’ The statement perhaps expresses the later veneration of the cross, exceptionally important to Christian piety but not part of the early Christian devotion. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus and, presumably, captures his likeness in her veil, as in later tradition. The soldiers drive the nails into Jesus’ palms. While the camera moves in for a close-up, blood drips through the nail holes to the other side of the cross. The soldiers turn him over while nailed to the cross and back-drive the nails into the wood, which seems illogical if they wish to reuse such valuable instruments of torture. The nails are then shown straight again after the crucifixion and, inexplicably, left at the cross. A raven takes out the eye of one of the thieves. Enormous amounts of blood and water are released by the lance-blows. The earthquake at Jesus’ death virtually splits the Temple in half.
After all this torture and pain, it is a special pleasure and relief to witness the events of Easter morning. I think it is one of the most moving and successful scenes in the film and obviously a depiction of the central event of the Christian faith, though the martial music is somewhat disconcerting. But, narratively, this explicit depiction of the resurrection shows us an event which the New Testament never describes. The camera goes where no disciple ever did. In fact, none of the above incidents are mentioned in the New Testament at all, though some are established parts of later Catholic piety.

The issue, however, is not the addition of these elements, per se, but the gratuitously anti-Semitic nature of many of these added details. They change the telling of the passion from the story of a Jewish prophet executed by the Romans to a Christian executed by the Jews.7 To capture the piety that is rightfully Catholic in these scenes, is it necessary to depict the Jews so negatively? I would suggest that it is not. The Catholic Church, through its hierarchy, has ruled that it is not.8 A schismatic Catholic such as Mel Gibson would cross these lines with fewer scruples.9 But religious faith is no excuse for moral lapses. He should be criticized, not praised, for these stereotypic images of Jews and Judaism.

Anti-Semitism

Part of the problem with the term ‘anti-Semitism’ is the difficulty in defining it. After having seen The Passion of the Christ, both Joel Siegel and Michael Medved, two esteemed film critics who happen to be Jewish, said that there was no anti-Semitism in the film. Before they saw the film, the ad-hoc committee of academics who had a copy of the script said it was not anti-Semitic, though it could be easily misunderstood by people with the wrong inclinations. I wonder what they think now that they can actually see the film with all the images displayed to the public. I am well aware that the term anti-Semitism is bandied about with abandon and has become cheapened by meaningless rhetoric. However, the film surprised me by its ferocity in depicting the Jews, which goes way beyond the New Testament even in its least generous moments. The list above tends to make me incline toward a harsher verdict than the ad-hoc committee. At the very least, the screenwriter, Benedict Fitzgerald, ought to have known better.

9. I believe the technical term for a Catholic who refuses to acknowledge the authority of Vatican II, as well as various subsequent guidelines, is schismatic.
Obviously, it depends on what one calls anti-Semitic. By some definitions, it will not be anti-Semitic. I can only think that Medved and Siegel had something like modern Nazi, racially based anti-Semitism in mind and so they could say there was nothing in the film that comes close to that. Nothing like Nazi anti-Semitism existed in the world until the twentieth century.\(^{10}\)

However, that is not the end of the matter. A different definition was tried by Pat Robertson, who said on Fox Cable that it couldn’t be anti-Semitic because the Gospels were written by Jews to Jews.\(^{11}\) This seems to me to be tendentious and wrong in a number of ways. First, the Gospels were not written by Jews. Only two had significant Jewish input (Matthew and John) and those two were significantly redacted by non-Jews before reaching us. More to the point, the film only rarely corresponds with the Gospels. Lastly, it seems to me illogical to think that Jews cannot be anti-Semitic, if other people can. No one wants to criticize the scripture of another religious community, much less one’s own. But I see no reason to privilege either the New Testament or Jews from charges of anti-Semitism. There have certainly been anti-Semitic Jews. There may not be any anti-Semitism in the New Testament. But if it is present, it ought to be discussed openly so that it can be squarely repaired by teaching and deed.

What is anti-Semitic is bound to be subjective. My borderline for ancient anti-Semitism in the New Testament would depend on whether the Jews are depicted as being supernaturally evil or responsible as a whole and without exception for the death of Jesus. That means that two short passages in the Gospels—Mt. 27.23 and Jn 8.44—are dangerously close to my definition and need to be investigated very carefully. It is not clear to me that the ancients would have understood this distinction, in the midst of their polemics. I would say that they both were polemical statements written at a time before our current understandings of hate-speech. They are both later than the time of Jesus. Mt. 27.25 must actually date from after 70 CE, trying to exploit the destruction of the Temple to make a theological point: ‘God remains active in history and the destruction of the Temple is Judaism’s punishment.’

John 8.44 marks a generation of the intense polemic between the Johannine church and a non-rabbinic synagogue at the turn of the first century. Neither one


\(^{11}\) See above, same interview on ‘Hannity and Holmes’.

can be accurately placed in the time of Jesus. But, having said that, I would classify them as suspiciously anti-Semitic statements, especially as understood by a later and more vindictive church.

Watching a film about the Gospels, I also learned a lesson about the less severe ‘anti-Jewish’ passages in the Gospels. I distinguish this from anti-Semitism. There are innumerable places in the New Testament that argue against parties of Jews, all the Jews, or Judaism at large. One might maintain, as an historian, that this is understandable, given Christianity’s theological needs to separate from Judaism its polemical stance and its missionizing imperative. Theologically it has a problem which Judaism does not when it looks at Christianity. After all, the Christian mission had a difficult job. It had first to attempt to convince Jews to convert and later to convince gentiles to convert to Christianity but not to want to convert to Judaism. It also had to deal with the doubts and sceptics among the Jews. Let us not forget that the Jews were the only ancient people who knew what a messiah was; though some Jews did convert to early Christianity, the vast majority did not. This took a special explanation. So the invective is perhaps not surprising, because it both helps the mission and externalizes doubt (which even Christians may have) into a demonic conspiracy. But the Gospels build this invective right into the events of the passion and trial, turning the Jews from sceptics of the Christian claims of resurrection into opponents of Jesus’ continuing existence. Even to make a naive historical claim about the Gospels in their current redaction is to accept a great deal of ‘anti-Judaism’.

My experience as a teacher has been that when Jews encounter the New Testament for the first time they are shocked. Most Jews do not read the New Testament until they are forced by circumstances to do so. This is true of students who must read it for the first time in humanities courses or of adults who see The Passion or the film adaptation of The Gospel of John. It is also fair to say that few Christians have actually read their Bible a whole book at a time. Most everyone, Jew or Christian, gets his or her Bible in very short doses during sermons and homilies. The argument of the Gospels is best discoverable when the entire work is read at one sitting.

Since I took part in the Visual Bible International (VBI) production of The Gospel of John, I have some real experience with how one might choose to depict the anti-Jewish portions of the New Testament. We had to reproduce every line of the Gospel so we had more difficult constraints than Mel Gibson took upon himself. One might have argued that the prejudice within the text should be depicted as brutally as possible, thus showing up its faults to the modern eye. I doubt that anyone would have perceived a tone so ironic and have understood it. We picked a more modern line—to stay true to the text exactly but to translate it as much as possible into a more modern sensibility.

At first I was only concerned with Jn 8.44, which had been on my personal list of difficult passages for some years. The entire advisory committee counseled
great care to the director, the producer and the actors. The way they chose to shoot it was indeed very clever and shows the artistry which creative people in the film industry can bring to such problems of interpretation. The acting and the direction made the scene work. First, Jesus allows himself to get very angry in the Jn 8.44 discourse, which gives a correct emotional context to the debate. Jesus is not offering cold, otherworldly prophecy and curse against the Jewish people, which would be catastrophic to understanding the meaning correctly. Rather he gets angry at a specific group of Jewish detractors, speaks the difficult lines in anger, and then calms down as he continues his discourse. Even the disciples react with surprise and fear at the ferocity of Jesus’ angry words, as well as react to the crowd’s hostile response. Then, as Jesus gradually recovers his equanimity and continues the discourse, so do the crowd. The direction and the acting are so believable that Jesus’ humanity comes through in a way that is not prominent in the text, although not a word of the text was changed.

In fact, no one complained about this passage, though the film was pre-viewed quite openly by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). This process is opposed to Mel Gibson’s marketing strategy. He previewed the film only with audiences likely to be very friendly to it, and mostly organized by religiously sponsored organizations. Where there is a will to defuse difficult passages, the director and the actors can do a great deal to the text without changing a word of it. Where there is defensiveness and hostility that is also communicated to the film-going public. Ostensibly, Gibson had more freedom to leave out objectionable ancient material by taking the freedom to tell the story in the way he wanted. But, in spite of that freedom, he added objectionable material. In the end he left out the subtitle to Mt. 27.25, which appears in Aramaic in the film. He also left out a scene, previously scripted and shot, in which Caiaphas and Pilate make the cross in the Temple courtyard, an impossible scene historically which comes from the explicitly anti-Semitic visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a German nun whose life spanned the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Because of my participation on this VBI advisory committee, I had another remarkable experience. I had a chance to answer questions from two test groups of viewers: a group of committed Christians, including many evangelical and fundamentalists, and a group from the ADL of the Bnai Brith of Canada, who also brought with them a group of friendly committed Christians. There could not have been a greater contrast between the two readings of the film. The committed Christians, including those who attended with the ADL, were deeply moved by the three-hour film which narrated the Gospel of John, word by word. They said that it was a unique attempt to see quite a different portrait of Jesus, though some said that they missed some of the familiar stories of Jesus’ birth and the conversion of Mary Magdalene. To show an unfamiliar but equally New Testament portrait of Jesus was exactly why the Advisory Committee wanted to do the Gospel of John first and the Gospel of Mark next. Both are authentic first-
century portraits of Jesus but very different from the standard Hollywood portrait of Jesus on film.

The second evening with the ADL was quite different. The Canadian ADL was quite concerned about the film and its anti-Judaism. Many called it ‘anti-Semitism’. But the Christians who were invited by the ADL disagreed with their hosts and openly and sensitively discussed their interests in the film and their perceptions of the Jewish participation in the passion. No one had taken Mel Gibson’s film into account at that early date. I asked one person whether he had read the Gospel of John and his answer was ‘No’. I already know how few Jews actually ever read the New Testament and so how few could actually distinguish between a film depiction of the Gospel and the Gospel itself. I would submit that he (and many of those who agreed with him) had not ever read the New Testament before and were reacting to the ‘anti-Judaism’ in it, not necessarily to the film at all. What they called ‘anti-Semitism’ I would call ‘anti-Judaism’, arguments against the Jewish religion and Jews, which are present in the New Testament and were not eliminated by the film. In effect, they were reflecting a first contact with the New Testament by saying: ‘Who are these New Testament narrators and why are they saying such bad things about Jews? We would never say such things in a religious document.’ And, indeed, while there is some invective against Christians in rabbinic literature, one would have to be an advanced student of the literature to find it.12 Because anti-Judaism is so commonplace in the New Testament, I doubt that any Jew who saw the film for the first time would have identified Jn 8.44 as closer to anti-Semitism in its depiction of Jews. Actually, I think that the trial scenes in John, with Pilate’s constant denial of Jesus’ guilt, were more worrisome to the audience than my theological red-flag at Jn 8.44.

The interesting thing about the discussion, since there were some committed Christians in the showing before the ADL, was the way in which the two perspectives, representing two communities who had just watched the same film, explained themselves to the other. Though the readings of the film were quite different, the two communities did not speak past each other. They encountered the other position with a great deal of sensitivity and mutual concern. This suggests that instead of battling press accusations, the film is better treated as an occasion for inter-religious dialogue.

The ADL also mentioned the portrait of the Pharisees (whom they are used to thinking of as wise men), as well as some of the dark costuming of the Jews and their use of prayer shawls.13 We were asked about the implements of Jewish


13. The costumes were actually brighter blue than they appear on-screen in that scene. But I do not think it is unhistorical to dress Jews in black or blue. In point of fact, the Gospel
worship. We had, in fact, carefully researched the *tallit*, deeming that it was still a regular outer garment in the first century. Therefore, not only did the Jews wear them all the time when an outer garment was appropriate, but Jesus and all his disciples wore them as well. We also chose not to put everyone in caps, although some people might need caps against the sun or wear them for other reasons. We felt the evidence was that Jews still could dress bare-headed in the first century but that they might raise the *tallit* over their heads when concentrating in prayer. Thus, that is what all the Jews do in various scenes and that is what Jesus does when he blesses the food at the feeding miracle in John. I was absolutely in awe of Debra Hanson, the costume designer, who not only took our recommendations to heart but also researched how to use vegetable dyes and natural materials to get the most authentic effects and, with all that, designed realistic-looking and wearable clothes for thousands of actors. Using believable and authentic costumes from the period (as much as we can know) makes a very big difference in the way the film is perceived.

The point of describing this incident is to underline that ordinary Jews and Christians will naturally read a Gospel story in different ways. The opportunity of the new interest in Gospel films is to use the differing reactions to increase each community’s understanding of each other. It is crucially important for Jews to know that American Christians do not normally read the story as a story about the sinfulness of Jews, just as it is important for Christians to know that there are aspects of the Gospel stories especially that Christians may pass over with hardly a notice, which are deeply upsetting to Jews. It is a clear opportunity for an inter-faith teaching moment. I believe that Bnai Brith especially missed an important opportunity to exploit *The Passion* for this purpose. It is my impression that the American Jewish Committee (AJC) took a more positive stance in this regard. Instead of condemning the film, they put together a community resource for inter-faith discussions focused on the film. They also counseled communities to plan meetings together about it.

of John regularly vilifies the Jews in Greek, while the translation we used often translated ‘Jews’ as ‘Jewish leaders’. As a result, the ADL concentrated on the depiction of the Pharisees, whom they understood more positively than the film depicted. On the other hand, Nicodemus is depicted rather positively in the Gospel and the film. And I do not believe that the ordinary movie-going public would so readily connect the Pharisees with contemporary rabbinic Judaism.

14. The Department of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, chaired by Rabbi A. James Ruden, Rabbi David Rosen and Dr David M. Elcott, published a resource manual called ‘The Passion’, which included the Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion and ‘Nostra Aetate’ of Vatican 2. It also included articles by Mary Boys, Philip Cunningham, Lawrence Frizzel and John T. Pawlikowski, all highly esteemed professors who have concentrated on Jewish-Christian relations. It also includes a statement by Jewish Professors Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs and Michael Signer.
But let us look at the history of the production and marketing of *The Passion*. Mel Gibson picked a conservative Catholic script-writer and hired only a single ‘theological’ advisor, William Fulco, who is a very well-educated scholar and Jesuit. But he sought out no Protestant or Jewish scholarly opinion for his project. He did give the screenplay to an organization of American Bishops but then back-tracked when the scholars to whom the document was given counseled (privately) that some changes be made in the script. He was, by all reports, enormously upset by the initial scholarly and Jewish reaction to the film and so sought to keep either of these groups from previewing the film. He expressed this upset in a particularly non-Christian way, by saying he wanted to roast Frank Rich’s entrails on a slow fire and kill his dog. This is not in the finest tradition of Christian ethics and it was circumspect that he acknowledged his mistake and apologized for the statement in his Diane Sawyer interview. It is probably fair to say that Mel Gibson has exhibited difficulties in anger management with regard to the early reactions to his film.

To be fair, he later also removed the scandalous scene of the High Priest and Pilate making the cross in the Temple. And he removed the subtitles to Mt. 27.25, where Caiaphas takes collective responsibility for the death of Jesus for all Jews. I think that this showed good sense. Those scenes should not be reinserted into the DVD, either in the film itself or in the out-takes. However, as we have seen, he certainly left in the final cut of *The Passion* an enormous amount of anti-Jewish invective that goes far beyond anything depicted in the New Testament. When someone actually goes beyond the already polemical New Testament text, one wonders what the motivation could be. The spirituality of the message that Gibson wanted to express, that spirituality which I described at the beginning of the essay, would have been helped not hurt by removing gratuitous anti-Jewish scenes from the film, as all contemporary Catholic leadership has agreed.

Even a brief look at the very number of additions that Gibson made to the story shows how many of them give non-New Testament portraits of the exaggerated evil intentions of the Jews. They are virtually meditations on Mt. 27.25 and Jn 8.44, the two most questionable passages in the New Testament with respect to the rise of anti-Semitism. One would think that a person with the freedom that Gibson took in designing his film (it is not accurate to the Gospels at all) would choose to move in the other direction; one would think that he would attempt to defuse the passages; instead he chose to emphasize the two conceptions again and again. One could humanely ask why he didn’t simply leave these passages out, instead of meditating on them for so long on-screen. Whatever one thinks of the text of the New Testament itself, I would think that in this day and age such additions cannot be seen as anything other than anti-Semitism. That is certainly what the American Bishops have been saying for some time.
I believe Gibson when he says that he has no personal animus towards Jews.\(^\text{15}\) I do not know whether Gibson is aware of the implications of the scenes he has shot. It is hard to believe that the director would not question and interrogate every line of the screenplay just in the process of bringing it to the screen. It is even harder to believe that the screenwriter did not know what he was doing, since he must have been consulting the New Testament text throughout.

At the very least, Gibson should have had better writers and better advice. He would have been far better advised to seek broad scholarly help. By salary standards in effect in Hollywood (and this is very much a Hollywood film), New Testament scholars work for buttons. It certainly would not have been expensive for him to bring in scholarly advisors for the film, without giving up any artistic freedom as producer and director. So, in the end, as director and producer of the film, the moral responsibility must be his own. The problems with this film cannot be explained away merely as artistic freedom.

On the other hand, I am delighted that most audiences have not picked up on the extremity of the anti-Semitic statements in the film. It may be an effect which is limited to people who know the New Testament pretty well, especially in a critical and historical way. But I fear for the ways in which the images in the film enter people’s imagination. I think this film will go down as a very badly made, albeit popular film, a curiosity and a further chapter in America’s love affair with Jesus, fortified by a time of crisis of confidence in American Christianity. But I would want the anti-Semitic aspect of the film to be duly understood as a note of caution in future attempts to bring the inspirational story of Jesus’ death and resurrection to the screen.

It is instructive to contrast the popular reaction to this film with the earlier film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was vilified by the press and many religious organizations. That was a film with many faults and many strong points. First, it honestly pretended to be nothing more than the film adaptation of the novel of Nikos Kazantzakis. Second, it was clear from the beginning that the figure on the cross was Jesus and that he would have to become the God whom the New Testament worshiped. What it purported to be was a non-scriptural inquiry, an imagined temptation of Jesus to live an absolutely normal life and die

\(^{15}\) He said this in his interview with Diane Sawyer. In his article in *Vanity Fair*, March 2004, p. 204, Christopher Hitchens discounts Gibson’s claim. In Hitchens’s interview on MSNBC’s Scarborough Country, on 15 March 2004, he says that Gibson has gone most of the way to anti-Semitism and accuses the film of pandering to anti-feminism (Mary Magdalene is depicted as the woman taken in adultery), and fascist brown-shirt homoeroticism as well. Even more moderate critics are worried. Ed Koch, who was recently appointed by the Bush administration to represent the United States at the conference on anti-Semitism of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, has accused the film of anti-Semitism because it indicts all Jews for the actions of a few. See [www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2004/3/24/220251.shtml](http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2004/3/24/220251.shtml).
like a normal man. So in some ways it was the exact converse of The Passion of the Christ, a film that depicted the life of Jesus in consciously fictional ways. The outrage over Jesus’ marriage to Mary Magdalene was enormous, forgetting that the film was never propounded as a scriptural truth, merely a part of the delirium of suffering on the cross and an example of what pleasures Jesus might attain as a normal human being that he was giving up by seeking his divine destiny. Caiaphas was, incidentally, depicted in a most realistic and un stereotype way so it went further than almost any other New Testament film adaptation in destroying the stereotypes of Jewish haters of Jesus.

Ironically, the film had a far higher Christology than the novel itself because it left no doubt that this was the Christ of faith, where the novel is constantly playing with the reader’s and the characters’ doubts about who this figure is. So it was a kind of ironic inquiry of the temptation of a God to be merely a man, quite an interesting subversion of a literary convention.

The film also had a number of impressive faults. The culture it depicted as first-century Judea was, in fact, North African, quite exotic and interesting but not the culture of Judea in the first century. Possibly the film’s artistic staff had been lured into their own love affair with Berber culture by one of those impressive vacations to Agadir. The acting was impressive; but in spite of the great acting, the casting was so inappropriate that the actors could never fully realize the roles they were given. Ironically, the film was deeply misunderstood. It was not only condemned as bad art, which would have been at least partly justified, but also called un-Christian and picketed repeatedly by committed Christians who did everything they could to prevent the film from showing in theaters. It did not seem to me to be anti-Christian because it is a deliberate fantasy, a situation contrary to fact, and in the end, Jesus decides against the temptation to live as an ordinary man and willingly takes his place upon the cross. In some ways, by a converse argument, it was arguing the same case as The Passion. But it investigated themes that were too provocative for the despisers of the film. In the end they were able not only to ensure that the film failed financially, but also they effectively kept Scorsese from making any other biblical films. In effect, they themselves created the rule that the story of Jesus is sacrosanct and should not be figured in film by censoring anyone who did show any imaginative artistic interest in the story.

The evangelical community has almost completely embraced The Passion, partly because Mel Gibson himself appealed to them with the plea that the Gospel (not his film) was in danger. This brought forth a call for a new evangelical crusade with the film as a centerpiece of the campaign. Partly this is a mock battle because the evangelical community knew it could win it merely by going

16. See, for example, www.seekgod.ca/gibsoncomments.htm for some of the enthusiastic response.
to the movies and maintaining that it is accurate to the scripture. The cost was the credibility of the evangelists who until this point had at least been respected as experts in scripture.

But whom are they battling? Ironically, critics of the Gibson film have been accused of trying to censor the film, though I know of no cases of picketing and no calls for censorship. Even the ADL has never even mentioned censorship; it is against their core American values. They suggested some adjustments in the script as a way to defuse the issues before the film was shot. All that has happened is that a small group of scholars and Jewish watchdog groups have accused it of bias, a charge which seems to me richly deserved. Then the New York and Los Angeles press panned it. But, as I noted earlier, if Gibson has the right make it, everyone has the right to see it, and whoever sees it has the equal right to evaluate it. Indeed, Gibson has benefitted from the controversy and is taking an unprecedented sum to the bank. Unfortunately, this may help finance other violent films on biblical topics. Gibson has been reported to be considering filming the Maccabean Wars. Anyone who has read 2 Maccabees 7 knows that the torture discussed there in explicit detail goes far beyond anything which the New Testament chooses to tell us. It is easy to see why this story would appeal to Gibson but it will certainly not resolve the artistic problems with Gibson’s religious perspective.

Conclusion: The Historical Jesus as Antidote to the Hollywood Jesus

Mel Gibson has given us a passionate, yet pathetic, portrait of Jesus, though it should be clear by now that he is not depicting any historical Jesus. He is depicting the Christ of medieval church piety, not the historical Jesus, nor does he much touch the Jesus that is portrayed in the Gospels. It must seem strange to ordinary churchgoers that historians are now in the middle of ‘the Third Quest for the historical Jesus’, as if the previous two ‘quests’ have ended unsuccessfully, when Jesus seems so available on the screen and in the Gospels. But the path chosen by this film shows the need for real scholarly effort to find the historical Jesus. Many New Testament scholars have refrained from publishing in the field because it is so easily tainted by personal religious commitments. On the other hand, practically everyone addresses the historical Jesus in the teaching of undergraduate courses.

As historians of the first century, we know that the portraits of Jesus in the Gospels are products of later times while the earliest Christian writer, Paul, hardly mentions Jesus because he did not know him in the flesh. The first two

17. Mel Gibson told this to Sean Hannity on his TV show on 17 March 2004.
quests have not been failures; they have given us a Jesus who survives the onslaught of the cultured despisers of Christianity and survives the charge that Jesus never lived at all. But the indubitable facts of Jesus’ life, those that survive the tests of the criterion of dissimilarity and the other hard tests for authenticity, are few indeed. They are such things as the crucifixion itself and quintessentially, the inscription on the cross that Jesus was accused of being ‘the King of the Jews’ even though this is not what the church wanted to proclaim about him. Crucifixion itself was meant to be a death so insulting and demeaning as to end all hope and respect for a political career for the figure or anyone who hoped to follow him. So it would not have been invented by any theoretical group trying to design a new religion. Paul himself tells us how difficult it is to preach about a crucified messiah to either Jew or gentile. ‘We preach a crucified messiah who is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to gentiles’ (1 Cor. 1.23). The stumbling block for Jews is that no one expected the messiah to be crucified; the folly for gentiles is to give devotion to anyone who had been crucified. There is a historical truth inherent in this complaint of Paul that does not survive to the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels, which are all promulgated later.

We know that the New Testament lacks witnesses to the resurrection and that paradoxically this tells us that they are not inventing the story, because every self-respecting god of the first century had a much more glorious end that was witnessed by all the most important people. These things prove that there was a Jesus, even from a literature we admit was written entirely by people devoted to him and convinced that he was the most important person ever to have lived and the basis of their salvation.

But it is hardly enough to construct a portrait of Jesus. From the hard criteria, we know that Jesus was executed by the Romans as King of the Jews, by which they intended to insult the Jewish nation. We may infer from this that some Jews helped the Romans capture or execute Jesus. But that is by no means certain. The whole trial tradition is enormously contradictory in the four Gospels, full of inherently unlikely details, and impossible on the eve of a great Jewish festival. The trial scene is also unlikely when read against Pilate’s reputation as a cruel and merciless tyrant. Josephus reports that Pilate was removed from office when the Romans realized how inflammatory his policies had been.

On the other hand, one thing which has to be true is that Jesus must have been believed by some Jews to be the long-awaited messiah, even before the resurrection, otherwise the charge of being a pretender to the Jewish throne would never have been brought. Which of his actions convinced people of this fact is hard to say—his teaching, his personal charisma, his overturning of the money-changers in the Temple, his healings, his raising of the dead? All these important aspects of Jesus’ life, the very things that give credibility to the proclamation of his resurrection, are missing from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion*. The only thing that remains is the supposed opposition of Jews, which rightfully
surfaces only later, when the Christian community begins to preach that Judaism is fulfilled by Christianity.

The most important thing about Jesus does not survive the criterion of dissimilarity because it is too much like his environment. It is a simple fact and must be true, though many Christians and Jews do not fully comprehend what it means: Jesus must have been Jewish. I do not think that scholarship has completely assimilated this important fact or we would not have so much recent talk about Jesus as a cynic philosopher. Whatever is meant, this Hellenistic vocabulary used about Jesus is simply inappropriate. In effect, Jesus’ Jewishness sets the bar for the criterion of dissimilarity. His Jewishness and his respect for his people must be the criterion scholars use from the start to sort out the various claims about the historical Jesus.\(^{18}\) Jesus must have been, instead, an eschatological prophet. I would suggest even more that he must have been an apocalypticist or we could not have so many statements about the impending end and such a strong and important expectation in his resurrection. And he must have been a person with enormous personal charisma and a teaching worthy of the Jewish community he preached to and the world that awaited him. There is, of course, room for argument.

Mel Gibson has given us a traditional portrait of the passion. He has designed a modern passion play, where the words scarcely do more than title each tableau scene. In it Jesus remains a cipher because we see none of his teaching nor his actions. We see only his divine endurance of torture. This may move Gibson and others but it is not what the New Testament tells us about Jesus. Mel Gibson has given us his own personal Christ of faith, which can be deepening to other people. The problem is that he keeps on telling us he is giving us the Jesus of history. His personal Christ is decidedly later than the New Testament and it is full of defensive and deleterious degradation of Jews and Judaism. I think it is time for academics to help Hollywood to find out who the historical Jesus actually was and to argue that defensive anti-Judaism is beneath the dignity of Christianity. The quest for the Historical Jesus will be a powerful tool in that campaign.

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‘MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL…’:
A REVIEW OF MEL GIBSON’S THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

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ABSTRACT

With its combination of icon and image, faith and history, this film does not fit the usual genres. But when judged in terms of its own unique filmic canons, The Passion of the Christ is a profound piece of cinematography, celebrating for the unbeliever the triumph of humanity over an all-too-common brutality and for the believer a powerful reminder that forgiveness and love of enemies lies at the very centre of Christian faith.

Key Words: historical Jesus, Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ, violence, anti-Semitism

In my thirty-three years of avid film watching I cannot recall a production that has so polarized critics, the viewing public, and academics while at the same time smashing box-office records. One month into the release my search engine found 237 reviews with grades ranging from C– to A+ and 1.5 to 5 stars. Apparently this is one of those films that exegetes its viewers—including this reviewer—as much as they it.

I have tried to keep two things in mind. In film as in academia, the fair approach is to judge a work on what the director sets out to do and not what the reviewer would have done if he or she had made the film. Second, I have tried to watch The Passion in terms of its own canons and filmic grammar. Again as in academia, genre is everything. Miss the genre, miss the movie.

Finally, I am writing from the perspective of a Christian who is a historian of early Christianity and a long-time amateur art historian and film critic who frequently employs both art and film in various teaching settings.
Artistry

At the outset the title is clear: The Passion of the Christ. This is not a life of Christ, but as Mel Gibson has publicly stated, it is his interpretation, through the lens of his Catholic tradition, of the sufferings of Christ in his last hours.\(^1\) This film is not about why Jesus was crucified nor is it about his message. We get flashbacks but only to underline the meaning of the Passion itself, not to fill in the gaps. Neither is the film about a materialist scholarly reconstruction of some wandering Irish (pardon me), Cynic Jesus or a mild reforming rabbi. It is instead, unashamedly, the last hours of the rejected Christ of Gibson’s Catholic reading of the Gospels. Likewise, viewers who look for a traditional unfolding plot-line and character development will be disappointed. Critics who complain on any of these points seem to me to be barking up the wrong tree.

The grammar of this film is faith and icon, image and poetry (albeit heart-breaking lament). Granted, this is not everyone’s cup of tea. But, at the risk of being trivial, by the same token such folk should not expect their opinion to count for much when it comes to tea-matters. Nor is it everyone else’s experience of faith, but in a pluralistic society Gibson seems within his rights to expect at least some tolerance. Consequently, I took some time to revisit the old Masters such as Jan Gossaert, Georges de la Tour, Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, the Unknown Umbrian, Mathis Grünwald, Morrazone and Giovanni D’Enrico, Andrea Mantegna, Juan Martinez Montanes, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Reubens, Hans Holbein, Rogier van de Weyden, Lucas Cranack the Younger, the unknown master of Hôtel Dieu, and so on.\(^2\) The echoes of their work, whether deliberate or not, were everywhere. This film, technically brilliant and beautifully shot, is a stunning piece of intertextual iconography deep imbued with the religious art of another age when a different grammar of the cosmos and of the meaning of human existence prevailed. That viewers need to be prepared to weave back and forth between ‘reality’ and myth and symbol is made immediately obvious when, in an allusion to Genesis 3, a troubled but yet quietly determined Jesus crushes the Satanic serpent underfoot in Gethsemane. This is clearly not going to be your straightforward docudrama. I was reminded of the first time I saw Magnolia.

For example, Rosalinda Celentano’s Satan is the most convincing and disturbingly alien ever committed to screen. Androgynous and devoid of emotion, it glides effortlessly and surreally among the players, unnoticed by those around it.

\(^1\) ABC Primetime Interview, 19 February 2004.
\(^2\) Examples of these works can be found by a Google search or by visiting such sites as www.artcyclopedia.com.

even as they incarnate its evil. If emotion is a characteristic of humanity— and as I happen to think, based on the Jewish Scripture’s emphasis on God’s compassion, also of God—then here is the essence of evil: a vacuum of passionless, languid and mocking malevolence. During the flagellation, Satan faces Mary across her shattered son, silently parodying her in the form of an anti-Madonna nursing its own mutant but disturbingly mature spawn; no innocent here (cf. the black-caped Madonna of the Unknown Umbrian). Gibson confronts us with our choice of incarnation and human destiny: the suffering forgiving Christ or the unrelenting brutality embodied in a diseased humanity of a stupefyingly cruel Roman execution squad. Later, when Mary, struggling with her emotions, rushes to assist her fallen son, and in one of the numerous flashbacks Gibson employs to relieve the tension, she recalls comforting him when he stumbled as a child, gently rocking him in a poetic adumbration of a Michelangelo pieta.

Not all such moments work as well. The visit of the crow on the unrepentant thief, while truly reflecting the horrors of crucifixion and perhaps intended to recall Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death*, could be seen as needlessly vindictive. The demonic children jar, but then perhaps that too is intended. Imaginative offspring of Judas’ collapsing psyche, behind whom when they finally evaporate after driving him into the wilderness is Satan, they stand in sharp contrast to the innocents who surrounded Jesus: the children see where many adults do not.

Although originally regarded with considerable skepticism, the use of ancient languages seems natural and appropriate; within a surprisingly short time one hardly notices. Even so the film conveys much of its power through the emotional narrative written on the faces of Jesus, the two Marys (especially his mother), and other characters. The key moments are when eyes lock in the silence. In this respect, Jim Caviezel’s Christ is the best ever committed to film. The internal struggle, the unnerving restraint, the quiet dignity as he slowly pulls himself to his feet—how dare the victim refuse to lie down!—provoking an outraged beating, and the refusal to answer blow with blow is both potent and never more relevant. But this is no cheap machismo of the strong silent type. This is something Hollywood has not seen before. To steal someone else’s thunder: a strength made perfect in weakness. The tenderness and numbing pain captured by Maia Morgenstern’s Mary powerfully expresses her—and God’s?—love for the son. No Jesus film has come close to capturing the mother-son bond so convincingly.

At the same time, it is an understatement to say the aptly-named *Passion* is violent. And given the criticisms leveled at the lack of historical accuracy, it is surprising how many of the same critics preferred to have their crucifixion in a more agreeable form—what did they expect of a flagellation? Still, the contrast between iconography and overwhelming violence could hardly have been greater. It was a risk but one that paid off. Obviously viewers will react differently, some

perhaps regarding it as anti-Christian, but again it is worth considering Gibson’s intention.

First of all, it appears that the Western church’s interest in the sufferings of Christ largely emerged during the repeated horrors of the Black Death in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Reflecting on Christ’s sufferings helped them through their own. Gibson himself confided that it was reflecting on The Passion that rescued him from his own downward spiral, and this film is a statement of that faith.4 Admittedly, this is not my experience, but it seems uncharitable not to allow the validity of his. Some have complained that the Gospels themselves do not focus on the graphic violence. But they did not need to. Everyone in the first century knew what was involved. (I wondered if the sadism of the Roman execution team was overplayed. But then it is hard to imagine how one could be part of such a squad and not lose one’s humanity—witness the recent events in Iraq’s prisons.)

Gibson also states that he intended to push his viewers over the edge. Initially disconcerting, on reflection I think he is on to something. Violence, gratuitous or not, has become a staple of modern Western entertainment (e.g. Pulp Fiction, Saving Private Ryan, Fight Club, Tears of the Sun, Kill Bill)—and as such defines the generation to whom The Passion is addressed. Gibson takes that very violence and turns it into a weapon against our complacency—as with our goodness we only like our evil in handy-sized lots—and amazingly uses it to redeem us, or at least those it seems with eyes to see and ears to hear. This is the only film I know of where the wronged hero does not ride back into town to wreak bloody ‘Die Hard’ vengeance.

But is the vindictive brutality really necessary? As a UN peacekeeper, Canadian Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire met with the individual widely believed to have played a major role in the Rwanda genocide. Apparently not a religious man at the time, he described the palpable sense of evil as ‘shaking hands with the devil’. On Canadian television as I write this review I see a journalist confront a man, living in Canada apparently with our government’s knowledge, who had machine-gunned fourteen women and children in Kosovo. His friend treated the whole thing as a joke.

Gibson, I think, understands the ugly realities of our world better than many of his critics (his publicist is a child of Holocaust survivors).5 Here is a Christ whose story can be told unflinchingly in Rwanda and in Kosovo. We might not find it palatable. But then need it be stated that crucifixions were not either? Whether one is religious or not, The Passion is a story about the titanic and brutally no-holds-barred struggle between humanity and inhumanity. Here unvarnished and raw evil is met, and our hope of humanity underlined, by one

5. ABC Primetime Interview, 19 February 2004.
man’s refusal to retaliate. In the end Rome, having spent its passion, is met only by unrelenting forgiveness. It is hard to imagine a more Christian message.

**Historical Accuracy**

But what about questions of historicity which have so exercised some as to produce long lists of sins? There are indeed numbers of historical inaccuracies, large and small, and several scenes not found in the gospels. To note such things is appropriate scholarly activity. But before reviewers get too over-wrought it should be remembered that this is Gibson’s interpretation through the lens of his Catholic tradition. Furthermore, Gibson is a film-maker and neither an historian nor a scholar setting out on a documentary. It ought not take a great deal of wit to realize that his claim to historical accuracy must be understood within his filmic horizons, not those of the academic guild. One gets the impression from some scholars’ reviews, however, that even as they reject what they see as his overkill they have themselves indulged, not a little self-righteously, in exactly that.

So of course at numerous points Gibson’s vision of Christ fails to do obeisance to various versions of the historical Jesus. But given that scholars themselves do not agree on the historical Jesus it seems a little unfair to blame Gibson because his vision offends this or that school of interpretation. And film is about nothing if not interpretation—framing of shots, angles, light, color, sequence and tracking, are all hermeneutical filters and all make film far less real than most people appreciate, especially in a well-crafted work. As one self-professed unbelieving film critic reputedly quipped: ‘For God’s sake, shut up and watch the movie’. I might not have put it that way but for God’s sake indeed.

Consequently, I was not particularly worried about hair length, that the nails went through Jesus’ hands (cf. Grünwald’s searing altarpiece), that Jesus’ cross is carried in its entirety, that the earthquake splits the Temple, that it should have been Greek not Latin, that the several ‘trials’ are compressed into one and mislocated, or that various scenes are added (a useful technique when you are trying to maintain interest in a story which substantial numbers of the viewers know forwards and backwards). Most of these items are either trivial or help sustain larger themes. Even something as ‘realistic’ as Michelangelo’s breath-taking Pieta has a Mary who in reality would dwarf the Jesus she cradles (at least one noted Jesus scholar ought to be thrilled that Jesus’ cross is as big as it is). Bare ‘historical fact’, absent the emotion of active human participation, would not only look ridiculously unreal it would be misleading. People make icons for this reason. And films in general, and this one in particular, are nothing if not iconic.

Genuine history is about much more than brute facts. It is about bringing to life what those facts mean. The really interesting questions concern meaning, passion and human response. And while plodding prose can appeal to our reason, film with its combination of narrative, (iconic) image, and music excels at engaging the emotions, and thus our ethical reflection and formation. But at the same time I cannot think of a single ‘historical’ movie that does not at various points engage in fairly free filmic creativity—it is simply unavoidable. And given Hollywood’s track record with historical dramas, The Passion for all its historical lapses could still be the most historically accurate film of its kind, which, admittedly, may or may not be saying all that much depending on one’s point of view.

As to Gibson’s liberties with the gospel accounts—odd complaints coming from folk whose own scholarship often makes very free with same—if the Lord of the Rings, with its far more serious departures, can win an Oscar for best adaptation, then The Passion must be almost a certainty.

Anti-Semitism

Charges of anti-Semitism are another matter. Is the film anti-Semitic? As a Jewish commentator I overheard a few weeks ago noted, anti-Semitism is a very big word which must be used carefully. And like all such big words it can be devalued when inappropriately applied. If presuppositionless exegesis is impossible, it is surely not surprising that many Jewish audiences recoil in horror, while many evangelicals and Catholics see only their own culpability. But Jewish commentators are themselves divided with even Abraham Foxman, director of the ADL, performing an abrupt about-face when he stated emphatically on public television that neither this film nor Mel Gibson were anti-Semitic (adding that he nevertheless felt the film was potentially so). A Jewish group in Australia agreed, as did a French judge, describing charges of anti-Semitism as a narrow viewing of the film.

So what then is actually on the screen? There are lots of Jews and Romans, but, not surprisingly, no Christians. Yes, we have a handful of venal leaders—

8. Cf. the remarks of David Elcott, American Jewish Committee, ‘Calling someone an anti-Semite is a serious indictment, evoking the Holocaust and genocide. Before I use that term I have to be quite sure it applies’. In ‘“Passion” Fears Seen Unwarranted’, Jewish Week, 23 January 2004.
though a few voice their outrage at the sham—dressed in odd clothing in almost iconic characterization and who wish to hang on to their privileges. But even they are finally appalled at the Roman brutality. The crowd that calls for Jesus’ death is surprisingly small as far as Hollywood epics are concerned. In terms of what the film actually shows, we have then a small group of leaders, supported by a smallish crowd and opposed by other Jewish leaders and various individuals, in one part of Jerusalem at one particular moment in Israel’s long history. And it must be noted that the genuinely just and compassionate people in the movie are also Jewish as is the victim: Jews are both heroes and villains. The point is, the film itself simply does not accuse all Jews for all time of Jesus’ death—that identification is brought in from outside (and those who do have the ability to hear the untranslated Aramaic shouts of the crowd hopefully have enough sense to realize that a small frenzied crowd, regardless of their heat of the moment remarks, do not in fact speak for anyone but themselves).

In terms of history, is anyone seriously suggesting that the then leadership of Israel were merely innocent pawns wanting only the best for this homespun rabbi but who were cruelly outwitted and manipulated by the nasty Romans? Does anyone really think that the powerful Jewish aristocrats of the day were deeply committed to the welfare of their people, and hence their manifold kindnesses in distributing their wealth among the masses and protesting Roman injustices? It would do well to remember E. Mary Smallwood’s pertinent observations that these people came to power under the auspices of the Herods and Romans in a world where power and brutality were only a disturbance’s breath apart.11 Nor did they recoil from collaboration or illegality when it suited, for example Ananus’ execution of James (Josephus, Ant. 20.200).12

Furthermore, the only Jewish materials of which I am aware that deal with issues of responsibility are unanimous and unashamedly open in ascribing the leading role to the then Jewish leadership in Jesus’ death (Josephus, Ant. 18.64,13 an early baraita in b. Sanh. 43a, in spite of revisionist attempts to prove otherwise, and much later Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah, Hil. Mel. 11.4 uncensored, and Epistle to Yemen).14 Given that among the diversity of details

13. This text, minus Christian interpolations, is authentic according to the majority view. But see now the important, if not quite conclusive, questions raised by K. Olson, ‘Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavium’, *CBQ* 61 (1995), pp. 302-322.
about Jesus in the various Jewish traditions that have come down to us is the near-unanimous consensus that he was a magician who deceived the people, one can understand why they condemned him. But again this is hardly to blame all Jews everywhere. The tragedy is that by continuing to identify all Jews with the worst Jewish elements on screen and denouncing the film for indicting the entire Jewish people, certain critics ironically run the risk of perpetuating the very stereotype they reject.

Others complain that Pilate was a harsh and brutal man and that Gibson (and the Gospels?) whitewash him. While Pilate was no doubt brutal, Josephus, hardly his friend, nevertheless tells of an occasion when, confronted by a crowd willing to risk their lives, Pilate was deeply moved (θαυμάσσεις) and sufficiently so to relent (Ant. 18.59; cf. ἐπιθαυμάσσεις, War 2.174). He is obviously more than the one-dimensional ogre that some critics, doing exactly what they criticize in Gibson, propose. Furthermore, we have no evidence that his brutality played any particular role in Jesus’ execution. But is it so unlikely that this cynical and jaded man knew through his spies that Jesus was not really a preacher of sedition, and might have been mildly intrigued in meeting him? Or, that he engaged in his trademark brinkmanship, offering to release Jesus and intentionally provoking the Jewish embassy simply because he did not like these people and here was a chance to shame them?

But then they called his bluff by upping the ante and rather than face an embarrassing back-down by reversing his decision, he callously washes his hands to save face. It is not unlikely, based on the various indications from Josephus and Philo,15 that he enjoyed the irony in that this probably upset Jesus’ accusers as well: at least he got something back at them. I propose that this is not improbable, and perhaps it is even likely based on what we know about Pilate from elsewhere. Christians, understandably, would seize on Pilate’s actions. But can we blame them?

My point here is simply to suggest that Gibson’s (and the Gospels’) version of events is not quite the hopelessly contradictory picture some confidently declare. People are complex and can behave foolishly and maliciously when under pressure.

Nevertheless, it would be obtuse to deny that there is a larger historical context in which passion plays were used to stir up anti-Semitism (though according to Rodney Stark this is not as straightforward as is often supposed, in that, for example, bishops frequently put their own lives at risk to protect Jewish people).16 I genuinely understand why some people react the way they do. But reaction must be tempered with reason. And on this issue the facts are that the three-century history of philo-Semitic American Christianity could not be in greater

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15. Cf. Josephus, Ant. 18.55, 64, 87-89; War 2.169-75; Philo, Leg. Gai. 38.299-305.
contrast to the anti-Semitism of Europe—and all the while reading the Gospels’ passion narratives. To saddle this film with the sins of European passion plays centuries past is, as Rabbi Daniel Lappin pointed out, not only ungrateful but unjust, committing the very sin of which Gibson is accused.17

Perhaps though the most embarrassing thing in all of this has been the rhetoric, some of it frankly ugly and brutal, to which some including Jesus scholars have unbecomingly descended. Criticism is fair enough. But I wonder if those who have mercilessly flogged and mocked Gibson realize the glaringly obvious irony? Or how much their reviews tell us about themselves as people? One really does wonder what motivates a professor of liberal studies to link the film with ‘sadomasochistic male narcissism’ in a ‘culture of blackshirt and brown-shirt pseudomasculinity’ including ‘massively repressed homoerotic fantasies, a camp interest in military uniforms, an obsession with flogging and a hatred of silky and effeminate Jews’.18 Whatever happened to scholarly objectivity and a willingness to hear the other point of view, to give the other the benefit of the doubt? Not much evidence of charity here. Are we taking ourselves too seriously? Hell hath no fury as a scholar scorned. I suspect though, as Robert Manne, Professor of Politics at LaTrobe University Melbourne suggests, that Gibson’s primary fault is that he betrayed the guild by daring to bring his traditional Catholic version of Jesus out of the Life of Brian ghetto where more enlightened minds had thought to banish it.19

Conclusion

This is a film that does not fit standard genre expectations and as such requires that its viewers be prepared to let the director direct. In seeking to do so I found this a truly extraordinary film, unlike anything I have seen in over three decades. I know of no other that reflects back at the viewer what he or she brings to it. I say this without being judgmental. Bring Braveheart and Mad Max and it is not hard to imagine what one will take away. Or, like a friend of mine, bring a notepad and spend half the time squinting in the half-light in order to jot down historical discrepancies and… Well, you get the picture (even if my friend did not). I suppose, appropriately enough, it is not unlike Jesus’ parable of the soils.

Second, one of the not unexpected side-effects of applying scientific method to history is that it tends to flatten everything out. Science by its very nature is

concerned with the run of the mill, the mundane, and the expected. That is why it is very good at articulating general laws of nature. But that is also its great weakness since ‘matter’ does not have a will or a sense of its own personhood and intentionality. It is not surprising then that secular scientific scholarship ends up with a slightly above average Jesus who is not very remarkable at all. Hence, tellingly, the truly creative and discontinuous genius behind Christianity is per force to be found elsewhere—not least in the imaginations of unnamed and ghostly artistes among early...Christians? This film, focusing as it does on the personal and the human in all our rich and devastating complexity, does not make that mistake.

Taken on its own terms, this is unquestionably the most powerful piece of cinematography I have seen in a long time, if ever. It is not watched. It is experienced. Not unlike its subject, the more I read the reviews, the more I think it reveals the secrets of the heart.
BEING DISPASSIONATE ABOUT THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST:  
A RESPONSE TO RIKK WATTS’S REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Rikk Watts can catalogue his enjoyment of the film, The Passion, which has had mass appeal. But Mel Gibson’s unhistorical additions reveal a disturbing willingness to use repugnant anti-Semitic subtexts as well as violence to elicit movie-goers’ emotions. While Gibson may claim that it expresses his faith, the film seems less about art and personal faith than about what Hollywood does best—making money by sacrificing artistic integrity.

Key Words: historical Jesus, Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ, violence, anti-Semitism

I want to thank Rikk Watts for his review and, in advance, for his comments on mine. He states his assumptions for reviewing The Passion as: to evaluate it only on what the film-maker sets out to do. While this sounds fair at first blush, it actually privileges a lot of information in a variant of the ‘genetic fallacy’. It ignores obvious contexts and pretends that we can know more than we do. It assumes that the film-makers (there are always many voices present in the film) know and have truthfully and fully articulated what they want to do and that their film actually does only that. It also assumes that there is no movie-goer with an independent mind, nor any social context. And lastly, it assumes that the critic is both privy to all this information and is free from any unstated biases himself. It is rather like saying that everyone else sees himself or herself in the mirror but the reviewer casts no reflection. In this case, it is particularly difficult to say what the film-makers want to do since they say quite contradictory things about it without any knowledge that the aims are in conflict. Mel Gibson, for example, has stated that he wants to do his own film and his own take on the story, but that he is accurate to the Gospels, he has used Sr. Emmerich to help
him, and that the film is accurate not only to the Gospels but to the events themselves.¹

In my review, I acknowledge what no one has denied—namely, that it has certainly been popular at the box office, obviously because a lot of people like it. To note that bus loads of film-goers have been organized by many churches is only to say that it is being treated not just as a film but as a religious depiction of New Testament faith. To say so is to say that the piety in the film has touched many North Americans. It has certainly affected this year’s Easter celebration where a great many more demonstrative Good Friday processions have been spotted parading on the streets. A panel of journalists and scholars on Charlie Rose’s interview show on Good Friday 9 April 2004, including Elaine Pagels as the New Testament and early Church scholar, pointed out the new importance of atonement theology in this year’s Easter celebrations. All the interviewers felt that atonement theology is, historically, a medieval Christian innovation and all felt that contemporary interest is due to the success of the film.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that what these movie-going pilgrims see is neither historical nor true to the Gospels. Polls show that the perception that the Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus is up from 19 to 24 percent.² The film has now opened worldwide. In Arab countries and in Muslim communities around the world, the reviews are running hotly anti-Semitic. Aljazeera, for example, has used the film to maintain that the organized Zionists have attempted to label true Christianity as terrorism. John Anast, the editorial’s author, further indicts all Jews (whom they call by the cipher Yahdah, the Arabic word for Judah) for the crime of deicide, stating that modern Jews are descended from Gomer, not Abraham.³ A lot of this is just posturing but the intent is clear enough and the occasion for the remarks is clearly the anti-Semitic subtext to the film.

Watts shows his enthusiasm for the film by comparing it with a variety of medieval European painters and sculptors. The film-makers only cite Caravaggio. The connection with the other Old Masters is in Watts’s mind, not the film-makers, so this small case shows that his positive evaluation goes way beyond anything intended by the film-makers. I think there is nothing wrong with appreciating them but one should remember even in some of the old masters, many anti-Semitic images went uncriticized. It is one thing to appreciate Grünewald in his own time, and another to forget the social context that produced him is very different from our own.

¹ See The Making of the Passion…and the Diane Sawyer interview.
² This from CNN on Easter Sunday, 11 April 2004. It is confirmed by Beliefnet.com. What the numbers suggest is not entirely clear. Among those who see the film, the highest change on this scale may be those who already reported that the crucifixion was the Jews’ fault. But the perception is up among all groups measured.
³ See ‘Mel Gibson and Anti-Christism’, by John Anast for Aljazeera in English, 1 March 2004. The Arabic editorials will, if this follows suit, be even more ferocious.
I am a bit more distressed by Watts’s caricature of historical Jesus research: ‘Neither is the film about a materialist scholarly reconstruction of some wandering Irish (pardon me), Cynic Jesus or a mild reforming rabbi’. I also note the term ‘materialist’, which seems to imply that secular humanism cannot appreciate either the film or the truth about Jesus. With Watts, I do not think Jesus is a ‘Cynic’ philosopher or a ‘mild, reforming rabbi’. But there is something to be learned from taking these scholarly portraits of Jesus seriously as paradigms. My point would be that the screenwriter, the director and the producer of The Passion never bothered to do their homework. The film-makers were trying for historical accuracy, accuracy to the Gospels and artistic freedom. That is not possible; scholars know that. Mel Gibson would have produced a better film had he consulted more scholars.

Watts likes the violence; he thinks it speaks to contemporary Western culture. I do not. It’s partly a matter of taste, I guess. But I do not think that violence is identical to ‘reality’. If the violence is more than would kill a person several times over, then violence is being used like ‘realism’, a kind of artistic style, not a depiction of historical reality. It is not there to summon the ancient world. Who is to say that our world is not just as violent? Gibson uses violence for just about every purpose in all his films. He seems just to like it in whatever form it comes. Furthermore, we should not live in the ancient world or justify violence or anti-Semitism as appropriate to the historical past, therefore acceptable.

Violence is like sentimentality. Sentimentality is always an attempt to kidnap the emotions of the movie-goer and it seems to me that this supererogatory violence warrants the same verdict. I think it is egregious in a Christian context and particularly egregious when the normal self-appointed watchdogs against violence wholeheartedly endorse this film and think the violence is fine. If you asked me which recent films really portray Christian commitment on film, I would say Jesus of Montreal, The Gospel of John, Priest, even The Barbarian Invasions. I think all of them do a better job than The Passion, which seems to me to be a pretty stock offering, not very Christian in its use of caricature and violence and more like the other, conventional films Mel Gibson himself likes to make. It has much more in common with Braveheart, The Patriot and Conspiracy Theory than it does with the Gospels.

Perhaps the point is easier to make with regard to the anti-Judaism of the Gospels. Because the Gospels say some unfair things about Jews when Christians were a small, oppressed minority does not justify depicting the polemic graphically when Jews are a small oppressed minority living among Christians. Nor is

4. Without a better footnote (17) it is hard to tell: Is Watts suggesting that Christopher Hitchens, the outspoken and very militantly atheist columnist for Vanity Fair, is a ‘professor of liberal studies’? Or, is this another example of sarcasm used against a controversial journalist by calling him a liberal professor? Or vice versa? Actually I think it’s too great a compliment.
North American so free of anti-Semitism or Europe so intolerant that this context can be ignored. Gibson is very defensive on this point. Though he starts by taking the freedom to cut most of the Gospel, he defends inclusion of questionable scenes by saying: ‘That’s what the Bible says’, as if all of a sudden he is unfortunately constrained from his already claimed freedom to cut and add. He said this several times on the media, including in his interview with Diane Sawyer. Other people may give Gibson a pass on this misrepresentation. I would submit that scholars, who are the only ones who easily can note the difficulties in making the Gospels into history and in bringing the Gospels to the screen, have a special responsibility to point out what the historical issues are.

The anti-Judaism of the film is exactly analogous. Of course, one’s definition of the term makes a difference and I clarified what I mean by it. The point about anti-Semitism is best seen by what Gibson adds to the New Testament story. The majority of Gibson’s additions to the Gospel are explicitly anti-Jewish. Little Jewish boys change into demons and change back. That is an image which will stick with millions of film-goers. His dualistic and anti-Semitic costuming and visual caricatures make the distinction between Jews and Christians even more obvious. He is not filming the death of a Jewish revolutionary at the hands of the Romans; he is filming the death of a Christian at the hands of the Jews.

Watts observes that even though Gibson is not interested in historicity, it is present in the film. I doubt that a disinterested study of the passages he brings up would actually demonstrate this point. When Watts justifies *The Passion* as good history by reference to the *testimonium flavianum*, Maimonides, and Sanhedrin 43, he does not represent a scholarly consensus. Great as Maimondes may be, he is not an authority on modern use of historical sources. (Why would one even bring him up, except as a kind of polemical flourish?) It would be unwise to make Josephus’ *testimonium flavianum*, likely a complete Christian gloss, carry the kind of weight which Watts needs.

Similarly, Sanhedrin 43 is no independent witness to the events in the life of Jesus; no one has seriously thought so for a very long time. One would be hard pressed to come up with a positive picture of Pilate from Josephus, no matter what he may say about any particular incident in Pilate’s sorry career. Philo also adds to the clear description of Pilate’s villainy. The source for the positive description of Pilate is from Catholic piety, not Josephus, not Philo. The positive description of Pilate is a message about the power of the Gospel. In fact, medieval Christianity exonerated not just Pilate but Rome in toto. Only Jews and Muslims were beyond redemption. Muslims were real enemies of Christendom. But Jews became the eternal, supernatural, demonic enemy principally for one reason alone—they doubted that Jesus was divine. While that is the depiction which Jews receive, principally in the Gospel of John, none of it is historical to the time of Jesus and it is inconsistent with a modern multicultural plural nation state.

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There are times in his review when Watts seems not to be defending the film but defending his faith. But no one has impugned his faith. I, for one, am impugning the film and Gibson’s direction and production of it; I admit that my judgment has something to do with the moral seriousness I have been led to expect has been characteristic of the Christian faith in my experience. Watts says that critics are flogging Mel Gibson in the way the Romans flogged Jesus. This is a bit too rhetorical for my taste. Gibson is the one doing the flogging. He as director chose to have Jesus flogged for what seemed like an eternity. And he as producer chose to flog his film by capitalizing on other people’s discomfort with his efforts. The only real innovation in the film is that Gibson has discovered that people’s religious emotions are just as exploitable as their desire for violence, sex and sentimentality. There is nothing wrong with making money. The problem is that Hollywood is renowned for sacrificing quality to do it. I submit this film is no exception.

I think we should also eschew artificially forced and essentialized choices: secular or religious, humanism or faith, Christian or Jew. A film can exploit both a legitimate religious spirituality and still remain anti-Semitic. These are all subtle issues which demand to be treated with scholarly disinterest and seriousness. The world of scholarship is filled with people who understand that scholars can have different religions, that they can be humanists and faithful at the same time; that they can be Catholic and add to Protestant scholarship, that they can be Christian and study Judaism, that they can be Jewish and study Christianity. We all have subtle and complicated lessons to learn from each other. The rhetoric of sermons and forced choices where the middle ground is removed is certainly misplaced in a scholarly journal. Very few things in scholarship are questions of either/or. To make them seem that way is to turn scholarship into a test of faith. But perhaps that is where the mirror reflects back most on Watts himself.
A MATTER OF HORIZONS, THE PASSION THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
A RESPONSE TO ALAN F. SEGAL’S REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

While historical accuracy, the levels of violence and potential anti-Semitism are valid concerns of Alan Segal, The Passion needs also to seen as a testimony to one man’s Christian faith that is explicitly designed to engender a visceral response, and which unashamedly and openly engages in iconic artistry, symbol and interpretation.

Key Words: historical Jesus, Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ, violence, anti-Semitism

I would like to thank Alan Segal for his review and the opportunity to interact with him in this way. It has been a challenge and a learning experience. Not unexpectedly given the polarization among professional reviewers, Alan and I obviously have different perceptions of the film, most of which appear to me to result from our very different understandings of the nature of film in general and The Passion in particular, and of the relationship between art, theology and history.

To begin, Alan’s treatment of artistic merit consists largely of a discussion of violence. This is a pity since the music, pacing, framing, staging, composition of shots and, more importantly, imagery, the intertextual iconography and the merging of reality and symbolism reflect Gibson’s skill. Alan is right: there is considerable emotional depth to this film, but unlike him I think it is earned rather than the result of manipulation. Unfortunately, Alan seems either to miss or misunderstand many significant aspects of The Passion as art, which Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, praises so highly.

I share Alan’s concerns over violence in film in general and I can understand why he found The Passion distasteful. Nevertheless, I submit that the issue is more complex and the level of sophistication and the variation of responses
among viewing audiences more diverse than is suggested by a simple comparison with action/adventure movies and an easy association with American, single male 17-30 year olds. Gibson’s own experience taught him that ‘pain is a precursor to change’, hence his effort to portray Christ’s sufferings. My conversations with various viewers revealed some profound reactions, but which were quite different to those noted by Alan. A number of young men, including some from Asia, found here a powerful alternative to Die Hard vengeance—something from which various parties in the Middle East could learn. An older Australian woman, who rarely views film and finds almost all violence distasteful, was so moved that she and a friend went a second time because she was convinced that the film’s richness would repay another viewing. A young European woman saw Jesus’ example as ennobling. Entitled to his view, Alan feels the violence is supererogatory. But there are tens of thousands who do not, including many who do not fit the summarily dismissed American film-going public, and I am not convinced it is because they are hormonally, morally or artistically deficient.

To characterize The Passion as ‘an action/adventure passion play… [about] a tough guy Jesus who can take it’ and ‘macho-man … meets medieval passion play’ is to get carried away by wondrously malapropic rhetoric. To reiterate, a comparison with Magnolia would be closer to the mark. But then we have very different understandings of film. Alan seems pleased that The Gospel of John retained every word of that gospel. While I appreciate the sentiment (we make films of Shakespeare, though at least he was writing for the stage), I think it betrays a misunderstanding of the significant differences between text and film (hence the premise of the movie Adaptation), and is one reason why The Gospel of John has received generally poor reviews.

In terms of historicity, Alan views The Passion primarily through scholarly lenses. As important as scholarship is (and let me emphasize it lest Alan also misunderstand what I mean), I think this misconstrues the film. Gibson and his publicists might be partly to blame for the mixed messages—is it historically authentic or a personal interpretation viewed through the Stations of the Cross? But, as the film demonstrates, it is a creative and unique synthesis of both. From the outset, the camerawork, slow-motion action sequence, and evidently unhistorical yet theologically insightful crushing of the serpent fairly telegraph that this is not ‘straight’ history, Aramaic and Latin notwithstanding. It seems odd that Alan criticizes Gibson for using Aramaic since it might mislead the public into thinking that his film is historical, but then celebrates the efforts at authenticity put into The Gospel of John, which adheres unswervingly to a document that he also regards as theological art and largely unhistorical. (In respect of the flagellation, which Alan felt extreme, Australian convicts survived 100, 200 and even 300 lashes with a cat o’ nine tails and as far as I know none because he was the Son of God.)
Of the film people I know, no one had any trouble appreciating the creative interplay of these elements that Gibson, a film professional, assumes. As Alan early recognizes, Catholic spirituality plays a significant role. But since the Stations of the Cross are about profound personal participation and emotional, even visceral, engagement (hence the art to which I earlier referred), I should have thought it apparent that in order for Gibson to bring this emotional impact to the screen he would need to employ impressionist (in the best sense) artistic license and imagination. Aristotle knew the limits of logic and the visionary reasons for rhetoric. Likewise faith, especially one that has changed one’s life, is not about historical neutrality.

Consequently, anyone even slightly familiar with the Gospels and, when it comes to the morphing of the children and the anti-Madonna and child scene, even those who are not, must find it evident that all kinds of extra ‘non-historical’ and ‘non-naturalistic’ scenes have been added. In other words, what Gibson means by following the Gospels is quite obviously—is anyone in the slightest doubt?—different from what many scholars mean. Clearly, the question is no longer authenticity but instead what the director intends by these numerous insertions and alterations. And as Alan himself admits, these variations are not really the issue. The reason he concentrates on them is because he thinks they are largely anti-Jewish (see below).

Could Gibson have done things better? Probably. But unfortunately some of Alan’s perhaps more pertinent observations are obscured by not distinguishing between serious and minor discrepancies. This is not helped when, although emphasizing Gibson’s remarks concerning authenticity (as well as in a less than flattering moment invoking a one-off obviously frustrated remark in order to justify an *ad hominem* charge that Gibson has little appreciation for the Bible), Alan inexplicably fails to mention that Gibson has also clearly stated that *The Passion* is his interpretation even when contained in the sources he references.

This seems to me to be a classic case of people talking past one another. Alan might think I am whitewashing Gibson. I am instead trying to understand him. I appreciate the lengths to which *The Gospel of John* team went, and perhaps Gibson could learn from this kind of attention to historical detail. But these films represent two quite different genres, and failing to recognize this is to compare apples and oranges. To make *The Passion* more like *The Gospel of John* completely misses the point that one finds it difficult to respond.

But if Alan is not a film-maker, neither is Gibson a scholar. He is a man who struggles with his own limitations and short-comings as he readily admits. It was important for me to hear not just what Gibson said but, given that he is not trained in scholarly precision, to understand what he meant (what Bernard Lonergan calls a reconstructive rather than polemicizing hermeneutic). But then it is Alan’s decision as to how much slack he is willing to cut. Even so to claim
that *The Passion* ‘is not accurate to the Gospels at all’ is the kind of overstatement one expects of a film-maker, not a scholar, and certainly not one of Alan’s stature.

Anti-semitism is Alan’s biggest concern, but he rightly recognizes that well-informed Jewish commentators differ on this point. In other words, this issue, like that of violence, is not straightforward. Even with all the hard work invested in the *John* project, responses were polarized. But when the issue is whether Jesus was truly Israel’s Messiah, it is hardly surprising that feelings run high. If he was not, then I understand perfectly why Israel’s then-leadership would want to be rid of him (I am also well aware of the debate surrounding the ancient materials I cited, but I included them to make the point that as far as I know Jewish sources are united, without exception, in having the Jewish authorities of the day take primary responsibility for Jesus’ death—and given their understanding, why not?). Alternatively, if Jesus really was Israel’s Messiah, then from a purely Jewish perspective, to reject him would be far more serious than a long history of rejecting the prophets. A neutral discussion, therefore, seems possible only among those who have no particular commitment either to Israel’s messianic hope or to Jesus. To expect it of those who have built their lives around such commitments is tantamount to asking them to deny their faiths. Both Alan and I hope that this does not boil over into prejudice and hatred. And as far as I can see, Gibson has never behaved in such ways. On a personal note, I trust Alan might be encouraged in that when I saw the flagellation I found myself declaring that never again would there be another Holocaust—of Jews, or any others. My point is that this is a complex film evoking complex responses. We must be sensitive to both realities.

So to return to Gibson’s additions: is Alan’s blanket characterization fair? I think not. For example, the demonization of the children is not a comment on Jewish offspring but on Judas’ psychological disintegration. He has rejected Jesus who was accepted by children, and now they—no longer innocent children but demons—become Judas’ accusers. Hence when they at last disappear—they are indeed figments of Judas’ devolving imagination—he finds himself alone in the desert confronted by Satan—an obvious reversal of Jesus who began by defeating Satan in the desert and whom children later affirmed. To see this as anti-Semitic suggests a serious deficiency in film exegesis. Nor is the opening ‘Why is this night unlike other nights?’ anti-Jewish. It is foundational to the Gospels’ theology: Jesus’ passion inaugurates Israel’s long-awaited new exodus. The question is an entirely appropriate thematic introduction. Likewise, the charge that Gibson is anti-feminist—most reviewers are agreed that his Satan is androgynous—is to mistake a partial metaphor of the seductiveness of evil for an attack on women (and this in spite of the very positive presentations of the two Marys, Pilate’s wife and Veronica).
Alan is right to note that the soldiers who arrest Jesus are Jewish, as are his accusers and the children who mock Judas. But who else should they be? Nevertheless, *The Passion* is not about Jews versus Christians. It is an iconic film about fallen humanity, good versus evil. As they tend to be in all iconic films, the bad guys are painted in high relief. Alan sees this as an attack on Jews and Jewishness, and he is not alone. But as even he recognizes, the vast majority of Christians, and many others including atheists, who have seen this film agree: *The Passion* is about the injustice of humanity in general, and for Christians, their sin in particular. This concurs with Gibson’s repeated personal confession of the complicity of us all. When a director’s explicit aims and the perception of the vast majority of his audience converge, I submit that this constitutes strong evidence of successful communication. And as yet I am unaware of any outbreaks of anti-Semitism, though at least two perpetrators of other criminal acts—murder and arson—have come forward to confess.¹

It is telling then that Alan expresses his delight that ‘most audiences have not picked up on the extremity of the anti-Semitic statements in the film’. Precisely. But might it not be because the extreme statements he perceives are simply not there as far as either the director or most audiences are concerned? In my view, Alan has misread the overall genre, mistaking symbolism for reality and the general for the particular. The chief priests are so portrayed because they are venal and self-interested, not because of their ethnicity. I agree then with the long-time and respected movie critic and Jewish commentator Michael Medved and others’ assessment of the charges of anti-Semitism in that I think Alan’s response is a considerable and in the long run unfortunate over-reaction.

In this respect, there seems to be an underlying assumption throughout Alan’s piece that I found troubling. Namely, that Gibson’s faith could only be acceptable provided it passed muster with representatives of the Jewish community. This I realize is an explosive issue. Let me be very clear that I in no way tolerate anti-Semitism (it is a pity one has to say so). But there is something inquisitorial about this attitude. And here again Alan’s review seems one-sided. He details what he sees as Gibson’s failures to dialogue and engage, but fails to mention the denunciations, malice, use of an unauthorized script, broken pledges, and so on that emerged from Jewish quarters, which respected Jewish commentators such as Michael Medved and Rabbi Daniel Lappin have vigorously protested. In a similarly one-sided vein, Alan cites Gibson’s angry response to Frank Rich but fails to detail either the extremely provocative circumstances (Rich had just denounced Gibson’s publicist, who is a child of Holocaust survivors, as a ‘holocaust denier defender’) or Gibson’s own admission on that issue. What I find confusing is that, while Alan seems to expect that Gibson show sensitivity

to Jewish concerns, he seems unwilling to extend the same considerations to Gibson.

Alan concludes with an appeal based on his vision of the historical Jesus. But here too scholarly opinions differ. It seems to me that a sea-change is occurring in New Testament studies. People such as N.T. Wright make a very able case for a significantly alternate vision based on different assumptions. In my view Alan is still operating with an older and problematic philosophy of history, an inadequate model of human ontology, and criteria whose shortcomings are well documented. But this response is not about approaches to historical Jesus studies.

Overall, Alan’s opinions differ considerably from my own. I think he has seriously misunderstood this film and I think I can understand why. He is rightly concerned about historical accuracy, critical of violence in film, and sensitive to potential anti-Semitism. The Passion, on the other hand, is a testimony to one man’s faith, is explicitly designed to engender a visceral response, and unashamedly and openly puts iconic artistry, symbol and interpretation ahead of historical precision though nowhere near the extent Alan suggests. Unless one puts oneself in the director’s shoes, a collision is unavoidable. As Alan himself explains, he went to see the film thinking primarily about extreme violence and anti-Semitism and that, if his review is an accurate indicator, is what he saw.
BOOK LIST

Books on the Historical Jesus


This dissertation from the Åbo Akademi University under the guidance of Karl-Gustav Sandelin is an examination of Jesus’ teaching on prayer. After a methodological introduction, the work sets the context of prayer in the Hebrew Bible, in Early Judaism and in Early Rabbinic Judaism. Jesus’ sayings concerning prayer are analyzed according to four sources: Q, Mark, Matthew’s special material and Luke’s special material. Auvinen concludes that Jesus’ teaching on prayer, while rooted in his Jewish heritage does reveal some distinctive emphases, including his lack of concern for the ‘outer conditions of prayer’ and his emphasis on the prayer address of ‘Father’ which was ‘one of the most marginal Jewish prayer addresses’. The social significance of Jesus’ teaching on prayer is that it ‘was a means of coping with the everyday anguish for the poor, Galilean people’ (p. 250). This helpful discussion could have been strengthened by an analysis of the texts describing Jesus’ own practice of prayer.

RLW


This third contribution to Wright’s multi-volume project is actually the completion of volume two, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, where due to space limitations the subject of Jesus’ resurrection could not be considered. This additional volume is now the longest of the three thus far. Wright begins (ch. 1) by laying the methodological groundwork for a discussion of ‘resurrection’ and ‘history’, which to many would be mutually exclusive categories, but not for Wright. The discussion of the issue itself then proceeds like a spiral, starting at the outer limits of the subject and spiraling ever closer to the actual discussion of Jesus’ resurrection. Wright begins by life beyond death in ancient paganism, the Old Testament, and post-biblical Judaism (chs. 2–4). Spiraling closer, Wright turns to discussing resurrection in the writings of Paul, outside of the Corinthian correspondence and then focuses in on these letters (ch. 5–7). He includes a chapter on Paul’s own experience of seeing Jesus (ch. 8). The non-Pauline literature is then explored by Wright, including the rest of the New Testament as well as a significant number of non-canonical, early Christian texts (chs. 9–11). The treatment thus far is then summarized in terms of the early Christian views concerning Jesus’ resurrection. With almost 600 pages of material setting the stage, Wright now turns to the story of Easter itself, first the general issues and then taking each canonical story in turn, from Mark through John (chs. 13–17). Wright’s conclusion is twofold: the bodily resurrection of Jesus is ‘a necessary condition’ (p. 717) to explain the subsequent events (ch. 18), and the implication for this in terms of understanding the risen Jesus as the Son of God (ch. 19). This exhaustive treatment of the subject will become a standard for decades to come, but its Achilles heel for many readers will be the methodological underpinnings that blend history and theology.

**Books on Subjects Related to the Historical Jesus**


This study examines the rituals surrounding death and burial rituals practiced by Jews and Christians in ancient Palestine. The discussion incorporates not only ancient textual evidence; it also includes archaeological evidence combined with anthropological and sociological insights. Discussions include ‘burial in shame’ as a context for exploring the burial of Jesus. There is also a chapter discussing the James ossuary. This otherwise helpful book is marred by the unfortunate practice of placing notes at the end of each chapter rather than at the foot of the page.
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- Use the correct form and style for abbreviations, punctuation, headings, tables, etc. The Style Guide may be downloaded from: www.continuumjournals.com/JSHJ, select ‘Contributors’.
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- Ensure the English is grammatical, idiomatic and gender-inclusive.
- Provide an English translation for all foreign languages both ancient and modern (usually in parentheses).
- Reproduce ancient languages in their appropriate fonts rather than transliteration. Ancient language fonts must be the Scholars Press fonts available free at: www.sbl-site.org (select ‘Resources’, ‘Biblical Fonts’). For Greek use SPlonic, for Hebrew use SPTiberian, and for Coptic use SPAchmim. You must ensure that you use the latest version of these fonts. For English text use Times New Roman font.
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