

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE QUEST FOR JESUS¹

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Introduction

Pick up any major historical study of the life of Jesus, read it carefully from cover to cover, and you will probably find at least four key questions operative in it:

1. What is the relationship between Jesus and Judaism? This is the question of *historical context*.
2. Who did Jesus think he was? This is the question of Jesus' self-identification—or, more commonly, his *self-understanding*.
3. What did Jesus expect to happen in the future? This is the question of Jesus' *eschatology*, the discussion of which has tended to revolve around how and when he thought the kingdom of God would come.
4. What is the relationship between Jesus and the early church? This is the question of Jesus' *intentions* for those who followed him, the discussion of which has often revolved around whether or not his aims were fulfilled, abandoned, or distorted by the emerging church.²

At least since the eighteenth century, these four questions have dominated the historical study of Jesus and continue to play a central role in major works on his life and teaching.³ Moreover, as a close study of competing proposals reveals, the way in which any given scholar answers these questions will to a large extent constitute some of the starkest dividing lines between their overall conclusions about who Jesus was and the meaning of what he did and said.

1 This article is a slightly expanded version of material that will appear in Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

2 Significantly, this last question dates back to the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, at the very beginnings of the modern historical quest for the historical Jesus. See Hermann Samuel Reimarus, "The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples," in his *Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, trans. Ralph Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970 [orig. 1774–78]). More recently, see Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).

3 For similar lists, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 89–116; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1.

This article will explore how the questions of Jesus' historical context, self-understanding, eschatology, and intentions have been answered in the contemporary quest by focusing on the words and deeds of Jesus at the Last Supper. On the one hand, in the case of each question, a number of widely accepted conclusions about Jesus in contemporary scholarship are not easily reconciled with evidence preserved in the accounts of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:24–25; Luke 22:19–22; 1 Cor. 11:23–25). On the other hand, when examined carefully, the words and deeds of Jesus at the Last Supper have a direct bearing upon the four questions of his relationship to his Jewish context, his self-understanding, his eschatological outlook, and his intentions toward the community of his disciples. Indeed, I would contend that to the extent that the contemporary quest has failed to integrate the Last Supper into its overall reconstruction of Jesus' life and teaching—which it often has—then it has also failed to answer adequately the four guiding questions in the quest for Jesus. In the words of the young Albert Schweitzer, written over a century ago: “The problem of the Lord's Supper is the problem of the life of Jesus!”⁴

I. Jesus, Judaism, and the Last Supper

The first question that presents itself to us is that of Jesus' Jewish context. How do the accounts of the Last Supper fit into the context of first-century Judaism? Are their basic contents historically plausible? If so, what might they have meant in Jesus' Jewish context? When we examine such questions in light of recent scholarship on Jesus, something of a paradox emerges.

The Jewish Jesus

On the one hand, nowadays it is all but universally affirmed by scholars that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived, and died a Jew. Perhaps more than any other result of contemporary Jesus research, the Jewish identity of Jesus has commanded a widespread acceptance, and represents a virtual consensus. Consider, for example, the remarkably categorical statements of several prominent scholars:

It is with ... Judaism, the Judaism of the first century CE, that we must carry through the task of finding the historical Jesus.⁵

Virtually no one today disputes or has any reason to dispute that Jesus was a Jew from Galilee.⁶

4 Albert Schweitzer, *The Problem of the Lord's Supper*, trans. A. J. Mattill, Jr., ed. John Reumann (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982 [orig. 1901]), 137.

5 Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 59.

6 Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 178.

One of the characteristic pursuits of the latest phase of Jesus-of-history research, namely the so-called Third Quest, has been the serious attempt to locate Jesus within first-century AD Judaism, to seek a Jesus who would be plausible within his Jewish context.⁷

Jesus had to have made sense in his own context, and his context is that of Galilee and Judea. Jesus cannot be fully understood unless he is understood through first-century Jewish eyes and heard through first-century Jewish ears. ... To understand Jesus' impact in his own setting—why some chose to follow him, others to dismiss him, and still others to seek his death—requires an understanding of that setting.⁸

[A]ny attempt to build up a historical picture of Jesus of Nazareth should and must begin from the fact that he was a first-century Jew operating in a first-century milieu.⁹

[I]f there is any enduring gain from the so-called third quest, it is the one hammered home by scholars like Geza Vermes and E. P. Sanders: Jesus first, last, and only a Jew.¹⁰

If [Jesus] belongs anywhere in history, it is within the history of first-century Judaism.¹¹

Scholars continue to debate exactly what it *means* to say that Jesus was “Jewish” and what Judaism was like at the time of Jesus.¹² Nevertheless, the same general point is made by many recent titles, which go out of their way to emphasize that the Jesus of history is unequivocally a Jewish Jesus.¹³ In short, the importance of Jesus' Jewish identity and context has become one of those extremely rare occasions

7 Tom Holmén, *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén, Library of New Testament Studies 352 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 1.

8 Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 20–21.

9 James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 86.

10 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (5th vol. forthcoming), Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2009), 4:7.

11 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 91.

12 See William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2005).

13 For example, Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum, Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, Vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological*

where virtually everyone in the scholarly realm agrees upon a basic conclusion and treats it as settled.

The Problem of the Last Supper

On the other hand, it is by no means immediately evident how the Jewish Jesus of scholarly consensus can be reconciled with what might be called the “eucharistic Jesus”—that is, the Jesus depicted in the words of institution recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul, as well as the arguably eucharistic elements of the discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John.

As is well known, according to all four accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds at the Last Supper—including what is commonly regarded as the most ancient account in 1 Corinthians—Jesus not only identifies the bread and wine of his final meal with his own body and blood, but also commands his disciples to eat and drink them:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “*Take, eat; this is my body.*” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “*Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*” (Matt. 26:26–28)

And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “*Take; this is my body.*” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks *he gave it to them, and they all drank of it.* And he said to them, “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.*” (Mark 14:22–24)

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “*This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*” And likewise the cup after supper, saying, “*This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*” (Luke 22:19–20)¹⁴

Discoveries, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

- 14 In some ancient manuscripts of Luke’s Gospel, vv. 19b–20 are omitted. An enormous body of text-critical discussion has grown up around this issue, debating whether the so-called “longer version” (including vv. 19b–20) or “shorter version” (omitting vv. 19b–20) is original. In my opinion, the manuscript evidence for the longer version is simply too abundant to maintain the minority position, which has only a single Greek manuscript in its favor. For these and other reasons, I will adopt the longer version herein, referring the reader to the discussion in I. Howard Marshall, “The Last Supper,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 247, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 529–541; Bradley S. Billings, *Do This in Remembrance of Me:*

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "*This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*" In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*" (1 Cor. 11:23–25)

Along similar lines, but in a different mode and form, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus said something very similar to this while teaching in the Jewish synagogue at Capernaum, when he declared it necessary to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man—which he identifies as real food and drink—in order to participate in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life (John 6:53–55):

Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink* (John 6:54–55).

The problem with this evidence is that it stands in stark contrast to the express directives of ancient Jewish Scripture. According to the Torah of Moses, it was absolutely forbidden for anyone to consume blood:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you ... Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Gen. 9:3–4)¹⁵

If any man among the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, *I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat*

The Disputed Words in the Lukan Institution Narrative (Luke 22:19b-20): An Historico-Exegetical, Theological, and Sociological Analysis, Library of Biblical Studies (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006). Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. (*The Gospel according to Luke*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985], 2:1387–1389) sums up well two of the main arguments favoring the longer version as original: (1) the "overwhelming number" of Greek manuscripts supporting the longer version; (2) "the principle of *lectio difficilior*," by which Luke's account of multiple cups provides a ready explanation for why a baffled scribe would shorten the longer version.

15 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Scripture in this article are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.
(Lev. 17:10–12)

You may slaughter and eat flesh within any of your towns, as much as you desire ... *Only you shall not eat the blood*; you shall pour it out upon the earth like water. (Deut. 12: 15–16)

Clearly, the biblical commandment against drinking blood was gravely serious and absolute: any transgression of this law would result in being “cut off” from God and from the people of Israel. Notice also that the law is universal in scope: the Torah commands that not only Israelites avoid the consumption of blood, but that any Gentile “strangers” living among them do so as well.

In light of such evidence, a fundamental problem emerges. If, for the sake of argument, we assume that the substance of Jesus’ words regarding eating his body and drinking blood are historical,¹⁶ then how could he as a first-century Jew have ever commanded his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood? If he did, would this not entail explicitly breaking the Torah’s repeated commandments against consuming blood? It is precisely this tension between the Jewish Torah and the eucharistic words attributed to Jesus that leads Geza Vermes to contend:

[T]he imagery of eating a man’s body and especially drinking his blood ... , even after allowance is made for metaphorical language, strikes a totally foreign note in a Palestinian Jewish cultural setting (see John 6:52). With their profoundly rooted blood taboo, Jesus’ listeners would have been overcome with nausea at hearing such words.¹⁷

Along similar lines, another major Jewish scholar, Joseph Klausner, writes:

[I]t is quite impossible to admit that Jesus would have said to his disciples that they should eat of his body and drink of his blood, “the blood of the new covenant which was shed for many.” The drinking of blood, even if it was meant symbolically, could only have aroused horror in the minds of such simple Galilean Jews.¹⁸

Note two points about the views of both Vermes and Klausner. First, both agree that there is simply no way to reconcile the Jewish taboo against blood consump-

16 I deal at great length with the question of the historical plausibility of the substance of the words of institution and the discourse on the manna in the Capernaum Synagogue in the full length monograph. See Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), chapters, 2, 3, and 5.

17 Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 16.

18 Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Hebert Danby (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 329.

tion with Jesus' command for his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood at the Last Supper. The words of institution are thus historically "impossible." Second, both agree that even if Jesus only meant these words *metaphorically*, as many Christian interpreters since the Protestant Reformation have contended, in an ancient Jewish context, such a command would have been completely repugnant. From this point of view, there is no way to reconcile the Jewish Jesus and the Jesus of the Last Supper accounts. Therefore, since the Jewishness of Jesus cannot be called into question, it is the words of institution that must be rejected as unhistorical.

This tension between the Jewish Jesus and the eucharistic Jesus has been felt since the very beginning of the modern quest, and continues to be present in studies of Jesus and the Last Supper. For example, already in the eighteenth century, Hermann Samuel Reimarus found it impossible to reconcile the accounts of the Last Supper with his portrait of Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary. As a result, Reimarus was forced to insist—against the testimony of all the extant evidence—that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper "without the least alteration" from the ordinary Jewish Passover meal. Indeed, Reimarus claimed that "one cannot see that he omitted or changed anything that was customary for this meal."¹⁹ To say the least, this is a questionable interpretation of the data. To the contrary, if anything is certain, it is that all four accounts of the Last Supper agree that Jesus identified the bread and wine of the meal with his own body and blood, and that such an identification was certainly *not* customary Jewish Passover practice (see Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25). However, Reimarus' assertion helps to make an important point: from the earliest days of the modern quest, in order to maintain the hypothesis that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, scholars were forced to explain away the eucharistic words. In the figure of Reimarus, the quest begins to exhibit a tendency to dismiss the startling words of Jesus at the Last Supper as "incidental."²⁰

Much more recently, this tension between the Jewish Jesus and the eucharistic Jesus manifests itself in another way: entire studies of the Last Supper that pay almost no attention to the Old Testament or to Second Temple Judaism.²¹ For example, one searches Jens Schröter's recent monograph on the Last Supper in vain for any detailed discussion of the early Jewish context of the images of blood, covenant, Passover, sacrifice, kingdom of God, etc.²² Perhaps, unsurprisingly, Schröter

19 Reimarus, *Fragments*, 118-119.

20 See Reimarus, *Fragments*, 118.

21 For example, there is a stunning dearth of discussion of Old Testament and early Jewish sources in Rudolf Pesch, *Das Abendmahl und Jesu Todesverständnis* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), and Helmut Feld, *Das Verständnis des Abendmahls* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976). By contrast, Hermann Patsch (*Abendmahl und historischer Jesus* [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1972], 17-39) devotes substantial attention to the Old Testament and early Jewish parallels.

22 Jens Schröter, *Das Abendmahl: Früchristliche Deutungen und Impulse für die Gegenwart*,

ends up concluding that the words of institution, with the sole exception of Jesus' vow about not drinking in the kingdom (Mark 14:25), in all probability do not stem from Jesus, but from the early church (to which he has devoted all his attention).²³

In sum, there remains an undeniable tension between Jesus the Jew and the Jesus of the Last Supper accounts—a tension that is sometimes not faced head-on. If the substance of the eucharistic words recorded in the Gospels and Paul is historically plausible, then how could Jesus have ever commanded his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood—even if he only meant it symbolically? In a word, how does one reconcile the Jewish Jesus and the eucharistic Jesus?

II. *The Self-Understanding of Jesus*

When we turn from the question of Jesus' context to the question of his self-understanding, the Last Supper presents us with yet another paradox. On the one hand, much of contemporary biblical scholarship on Jesus concludes that we lack solid evidence that he saw himself as or ever claimed to be the messiah. On the other hand, if the words of institution at the Last Supper are basically historical, then it is rather hard to square them with a Jesus who did not see himself as anything more than just a Jewish teacher or prophet.

The Dogma of the Non-Messianic Jesus

In his massive study on the death of Jesus, Raymond Brown once described the idea that “neither Jesus nor his followers thought he was the Messiah” as a “dogma” of modern critical scholarship.²⁴ Roughly around the same time, Martin Hengel used equally strong language: “Today the unmessianic Jesus has almost become a dogma among many New Testament scholars.”²⁵

To be sure, there are numerous scholars who have argued *in favor* of some kind of messianic self-understanding on the part of the historical Jesus.²⁶ Indeed, at the end of his life, even Rudolf Bultmann retracted his earlier assertion that Jesus saw himself merely as a rabbi and concluded instead that Jesus appeared as

Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 210 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2006).

23 Schröter, *Das Abendmahl*, 132–133.

24 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 1:478.

25 Martin Hengel, “Jesus, the Messiah of Israel,” in *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 16.

26 Most recently, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 221–304; Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who Is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). I too have made the case for Jesus' messianic self-understanding in Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.204 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 455–514. See also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 477–539; Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 178–180.

a messianic prophet whose proclamation “implies a christology.”²⁷ Nevertheless, it remains true that many scholarly works and introductions to the New Testament reflect the assumption that no historically reliable evidence exists that Jesus saw himself as the Jewish messiah.

For our purposes in this article, one key feature of this so-called “dogma” is the conviction that Jesus did not attribute any redemptive or saving significance to his death.²⁸ Consider the following remarks from recent works on Jesus:

The inauthenticity [of Jesus’ description of his death as a ‘ransom for many’] follows from the fact that it is the ‘risen Christ’ speaking.²⁹

It’s not clear why, exactly, Jesus went with his disciples to Jerusalem. A theologian, of course, might say that it was in order to die for the sins of the world. This view, though, is based on Gospel sayings ... that cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, in that they portray Jesus as being fully cognizant of the details of his own fate.³⁰

It is not historically impossible that Jesus was weird ... But the view that he plotted his own redemptive death makes him strange in any century and thrusts the entire drama into his peculiar inner psyche. The other things that we know about him make him a *reasonable* first-century visionary. We should be guided by them.³¹

Perhaps the most influential articulation of this view comes from Rudolf Bultmann, who famously wrote:

The greatest embarrassment to the attempt to reconstruct a portrait of Jesus is the fact that we cannot know how Jesus understood his end, his death. It is symptomatic that it is practically universally assumed that he understood this as the organic

27 Rudolf Bultmann, “The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus,” in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ: Essays on the New Quest for the Historical Jesus*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 28–29.

28 For discussion, see Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 47–75; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 805–818; Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2:1468–1491 (with bibliography).

29 Gerd Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years: What He Really Did and Said*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM; Amherst: Prometheus, 2001), 72.

30 Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 209–210.

31 Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 332–333 (emphasis original).

or necessary conclusion to his activity. But how do we know this, when prophecies of the passion must be understood by critical research as *vaticinia ex eventu* [foretelling after the event]? ... What is certain is that he was merely crucified by the Romans, and thus suffered the death of a political criminal. This death can scarcely be understood as an inherent and necessary consequence of his activity; rather it took place because his activity was misconstrued as political activity. In that case it would have been—historically speaking—a meaningless fate. We may not veil from ourselves the possibility that he suffered a collapse.³²

The impact of Bultmann's assessment of the historical question of Jesus' self-understanding is hard to overestimate. As I have shown elsewhere, such sentiments have led to a situation in which many influential scholars on Jesus do not consider it necessary even to discuss the evidence that Jesus saw his death as redemptive, much less to provide arguments for why this evidence should be regarded as unhistorical.³³ As I stated above, while this is certainly not true of all studies on Jesus, it is widespread enough for the most recent full-length study of Jesus and his death to draw the following conclusion: "Many scholars, perhaps a majority today, think Jesus was innocent, that he was righteous, that his death was splendidly exemplary, and/or that he died as a result of his self-claim and his mission, but that his death was not undertaken (consciously and deliberately) as an atonement."³⁴

It seems, then, that the "dogma" of the non-messianic Jesus—and its sister, the dogma of the non-redemptive Jesus—has become something of an assumption in the minds of many contemporary scholars.

The Problem of the Words of Institution

A major problem with this dogma is that if the words of institution attributed to Jesus at the Last Supper are basically historical, then it is rather difficult to square them with the non-messianic Jesus.

In all three Synoptic accounts of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, he specifically identifies himself as the "the Son of man" whose death is prophesied in Jewish

32 Bultmann, "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus," 22–23.

33 For example, the evidence that Jesus saw his death as Son of Man as redemptive (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45) is ignored in the following reconstructions: Karl Jaros, *Jesus von Nazareth: Geschichte und Deutung* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000); Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*; Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody: Hendricksen, 1997); Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*; Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James Robinson (New York: Harper, 1960). See Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 419.

34 McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 71.

Scripture (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22). Although the exact meaning of Jesus' usage of the "Son of man" continues to be debated, the expression itself continues to be widely regarded as a positive indicator of historicity. If, as some scholars hold (and I have argued elsewhere), the Son of Man *is* in fact a messianic figure in Daniel and Jesus saw himself as this figure, then this strong linkage between the Last Supper and Jesus' self-understanding as Son of Man poses a serious problem for the dogma of the non-messianic Jesus.³⁵ Perhaps even more striking is that in all four accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus identifies the wine of the meal with his own "blood" that will establish a new "covenant" between God and his people. In all four accounts, Jesus uses the language of sacrifice to describe his blood as being offered for others:

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for *this is my blood of the [new] covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:27–28)

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "*This is my blood of the [new] covenant*, which is poured out for many." (Mark 14:23–24)

And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you *is the new covenant in my blood.*" (Luke 22:20)

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.* Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:25)

Numerous scholars have identified in these accounts allusions to the "blood of the covenant" established by Moses (Exod. 24:8), the "new covenant" spoken of by the prophets (Jer. 31:31), as well as the sacrificial death of the suffering servant who offers himself for "many" (Isa. 53:12).³⁶

Now, if Jesus understood himself as merely a rabbi, or prophet, or anything less than the messianic redeemer (whether he saw himself as *more* than a messiah is yet another question), then we should not expect to find him saying and doing the

35 See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 293–303; Bird, *Are You the One Who Is to Come?*, 78–98; Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 54–55; Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 107 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). In light of these connections, Seyoon Kim (*The Son of Man as the Son of God*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 30 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983]) holds that the words of institution may be aptly described as "the eucharistic words of the Son of Man."

36 See McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 275–292.

kinds of things the evidence claims he said and did at his final meal. Conversely, if the eucharistic words of institution are basically historical, then they make good sense on the lips of a Jesus who saw himself as the messianic deliverer of Israel, one whose death would somehow usher in the age of redemption awaited by many Jews and spoken of by the prophets.

This tension between the dogma of the non-messianic Jesus and the evidence in the accounts of the Last Supper is manifest in the work of scholars who deny that Jesus saw himself as messiah and/or that he attributed any redemptive significance to his death.³⁷ Consider the following:

All of the texts which deal with the last supper of Jesus reflect the liturgical concerns of the meal celebrations of the various churches. *No text reports the historical event ... The words of institution ... [are] reminiscent of Isaiah 53:12, but Jesus cannot have spoken that way ...* [W]hen we examine Jesus' message elsewhere, we find nowhere the suggestion that God's gracious acceptance of the lost was dependent in any way on the sacrifice of Jesus' own life.³⁸

If it is certain that according to the accounts of Paul and Mark (the same is probably true of the accounts of Matthew and Luke) Jesus celebrated the first Lord's Supper with his disciples, at which he distributed to them his body and blood and at which they ate his body and drink his blood symbolically, really, or in whatever way, *then it is equally certain that the institution of the supper thus described is not historical ... [For] he had said nothing about a saving effect of his death or even his resurrection ...* Only Jesus' expectation of the future kingdom of God stands at the centre, not Jesus as savior ...³⁹

According to these accounts [of the Last Supper], he told his disciples that the unleavened bread was (or represented) his body that would be broken, and the cup of wine was (or represented) his blood that would be shed (Mark 14:22–25; Matt. 26:26–29; Luke 22:15–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26). *It's very difficult to know whether this "institution" of the Lord's Supper is historical.* On the one hand, it is multiply attested in independent sources, even

37 See, for example, Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James E. Crouch (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 187–197, for an emphatic denial of Jesus' messianic self-understanding.

38 Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 340–342 (emphasis added).

39 Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years*, 96–97 (emphasis added).

though they disagree concerning the precise words that were spoken. And one of these sources, Paul, who claimed to know people who had been there at the time, was writing just twenty years after the event. *On the other hand, the accounts seem so heavily "Christianized" with the doctrine of the saving effect of Jesus' death (a doctrine that developed, of course, after he had died), that it is hard to know here what is history and what is later theology.*⁴⁰

In all three of these analyses, the historicity of the words of institution at the Last Supper is rejected, not because of any evidence to the contrary, but because of the assumption that Jesus did not see his death as redemptive. Bart Ehrman's statements are particularly revealing. On the one hand, according to his own criteria of historicity, the words of institution should pass with flying colors, since they are quadruply attested, and since he regards Paul's account as the earliest recorded words of Jesus.⁴¹ On the other hand, when Ehrman is faced with the evidence in the Last Supper accounts that Jesus saw his death as redemptive, he quickly jettisons the very criteria of authenticity which in other cases he utilizes to establish the historicity of a given saying or deed, thus casting doubt on the words of institution. Indeed, he does not seem to consider the possibility that the reason why the words of institution are so solidly attested may be because the idea that Jesus' death had "saving significance" goes back to Jesus himself.

In sum, it is quite common nowadays to assume that Jesus did not see himself as the messiah and, *a fortiori*, did not see his death as redemptive. It is very difficult, however, to see how such conclusions can be reconciled with the words and deeds of Jesus at the Last Supper. In light of this situation, we find ourselves on the horns of yet another historical dilemma: Is it possible to reconcile the non-messianic Jesus and the Jesus of the Last Supper? Is one of them in error? If so, which?

III. The Eschatology of Jesus

A third issue regards the relationship between the accounts of the Last Supper and Jesus' eschatological expectations. On the one hand, one of the most influential theses of the twentieth century is that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God should be understood in light of ancient Jewish beliefs about the end of history, the final judgment, and the destruction and renewal of creation. On the other hand, what often goes unnoted is how difficult it is to integrate the words of institution into the portrait of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet at the end of history.

40 Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 215 (emphasis added).

41 Cf. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 85–96.

The Apocalyptic Jesus and the End of History

The pervasive influence of an apocalyptic view of Jesus is commonly credited to Albert Schweitzer's famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906).⁴² In the wake of Schweitzer's work, it became widely accepted that Jesus' expectations were characterized by what Schweitzer referred to as "thoroughgoing eschatology."⁴³ From this perspective, Jesus acted on the conviction that the end of the present world was imminent and would coincide with the advent of the kingdom of God. In Schweitzer's own words, Jesus "thought the end was at hand."⁴⁴ Therefore, he expected "the immediate coming of the last things"—that is, the final tribulation, the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead, etc.—along with "the coming of the new supernatural world."⁴⁵

For Schweitzer, Jesus not only expected the end to take place soon, he also acted on this expectation by going to Jerusalem to die and thereby force the coming of the kingdom to take place. Consider Schweitzer's famous description of how Jesus understood his death with the accounts of the Last Supper in mind:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.⁴⁶

Schweitzer's Jesus does not look beyond his own death precisely because he saw it as the event that would "bring all ordinary history to a close." Consequently, for Schweitzer, Jesus did not expect his disciples to continue the work of his public

42 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968 [orig. 1906]). The English translation was recently revised and expanded in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, trans. William Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001). Given the impact of the first edition on English-speaking scholarship, in what follows, the page references (unless otherwise noted) are to the first English edition.

43 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 330–397.

44 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 395.

45 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 365.

46 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 371.

ministry after his death: "[The disciples] are not [Jesus'] helpers in the work of teaching; we never see them in that capacity, and *He did not prepare them to carry on that work after His death.*"⁴⁷ For Schweitzer, then, Jesus was an eschatological prophet in the strictest sense of the word: he proclaimed and expected the end of ordinary history to coincide with his own demise.

In the wake of Schweitzer's work, the view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet of the imminent end of the world soon became widely accepted by a large sector of New Testament studies.⁴⁸ Over and over again in influential books on Jesus, we find conclusions such as the following:

Jesus' generation ... passed away. They all tasted death. And it is not the kingdom of God that has come but the scoffers who ask, Where is the promise of his coming? All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. Jesus the millenarian prophet, like all millenarian prophets, was wrong.⁴⁹

Jesus appears to have anticipated that the coming judgment of God, to be brought by the Son of Man in a cosmic act of destruction and salvation, was imminent. It could happen at any time. But it would certainly happen within his own generation.⁵⁰

[T]he great event which Jesus was convinced would happen in his lifetime failed to materialize ...⁵¹

We have no saying of Jesus that postpones the end into the distant future ... That raises an extremely serious question: must we not concede that Jesus' expectation of an imminent end was one that remained unfulfilled? Honesty and the demand for truthfulness compel us to answer 'Yes'. Jesus expected the end would come soon.⁵²

[Jesus expected] salvation not from a miraculous change in historical (i.e., political and social) conditions, but from a cosmic catastrophe which will do away with all conditions of the present world as it is.⁵³

47 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 371 (emphasis added).

48 On the influence of Schweitzer, see Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 83–124.

49 Dale C. Allison Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 218.

50 Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 161.

51 Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 211.

52 Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I. The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (New York: SCM; London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 139.

53 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,

Such examples could be easily multiplied. To be sure, there are voices to the contrary.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, when modern scholarship is taken as a whole, it seems as if the Jesus of Schweitzer—the apocalyptic Jesus of the imminent end of history—has convinced many and left an indelible mark on the way in which Jesus' eschatological outlook is conceived.

The Problem of the Words of Institution

One serious problem with the hypothesis of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet of the imminent end of history is that scholars who adopt this point of view have substantial difficulty making sense of the words of institution recorded in our earliest accounts of the Last Supper. In these words, Jesus apparently looks *beyond* his own imminent suffering and death, in at least two ways. First, as we have already mentioned, in all four accounts of the Last Supper, he speaks of his own "blood" as establishing a new "covenant" between God and his people (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Second, and equally important, he commands the disciples to repeat his actions in "remembrance" of him:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. *Do this in remembrance of me.*" And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is *the new covenant in my blood.*" (Luke 22:19–20)⁵⁵

1951–55), 1:4.

54 That is, scholars who reject the idea that Jesus shared the eschatological expectation of an imminent cosmic catastrophe. See Robert J. Millar (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2001); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). For a very helpful analysis, see also Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: the Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 246–292. In recent times a number of scholars differ from Schweitzer in rejecting as unhistorical the three key passages in which Jesus seems to speak of the imminent advent of the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:23; Mark 9:1; 13:30 [and parallels]). With this solution, the difficulty of the imminent end of history disappears, though the problem of exactly what the coming of the kingdom means remains. See, for example, Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:336–348; Gnilya *Jesus of Nazareth*, 147–149; Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 199–202.

55 In treating the longer version of the words of institution in Luke's Gospel as text-critically authentic, I am following the most recent and exhaustive work on the subject by Bradly S. Billings, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Disputed Words in the Lukan Institution Narrative (Luke 22:19b–20): An Historico-Exegetical, Theological, and Sociological Analysis*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006) as well as François Bovon, *Luke 3*, trans. James Crouch (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 154–155. See also Eldon Jay Epp, "The Disputed Words of the Eucharistic Institution (Luke 22, 19b–20): The Long and Short of the Matter," *Biblica* 90 (2009): 407–416; Marshall, "The Last Supper," 529–541; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1387–1389. Given the strength and diversity of the manuscripts of Luke that contain the longer form and the circularity of arguments in favor of the shorter version, this seems to be the strongest position.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "*This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*" In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*" (1 Cor. 11:23–25)

Taken together, these passages can be accurately described as words of *institution*, in which Jesus is commanding the disciples to repeat a particular ritual in his absence and after his death.

In light of such texts, T. Francis Glasson, one of the twentieth century's most vocal critics of Schweitzer's reconstruction, makes a case against the apocalyptic Jesus of the immediate end in his small but significant book, *Jesus and the End of the World*.⁵⁶ First, Glasson argues that the command to repeat his actions at the Last Supper implies that Jesus did *not* expect the end of history to coincide with his death:

For seventy years we have been told that Jesus could not have envisaged the Church because his view of the future left no interval of time in which such a community could operate. Yet the evidence ... surely shows that he did count on the continuance of human history after his death ... The words "This do in remembrance of me" occur twice in the oldest account we have, *1 Corinthians* 11:24 and 25 ... However the words are interpreted, they are inconsistent with the view that Jesus expected the world to end immediately after his crucifixion ...⁵⁷

Second, and perhaps even more important, Glasson points out that Jesus' words about establishing a new "covenant" in his blood not only shows that he did not think the world would end immediately, but rather, when interpreted in light of the Jewish Scriptures, that the era of Jesus' new covenant would endure for some time:

[Even a] "short interval" does not appear to do justice to the conception of a new covenant and a period in which it would operate ... The words "my blood of the covenant" (Mark 14:24) and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25) look back, as the commentators remind us, to Exodus

56 T. F. Glasson, *Jesus and the End of the World* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1980). See also the important essay, T. Francis Glasson, "Schweitzer's Influence—Blessing or Bane?," *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (1977): 289–302.

57 Glasson, *Jesus and the End of the World*, 65–66.

24 ... Jesus knew that the covenant at Sinai had been instituted many centuries before. Is it conceivable that he envisaged only a “short interval” before the Last Judgment and a supernatural new world? ... When Jesus in the upper room referred to this [the covenant], surely he cannot at the same time have thought that a catastrophic kingdom was imminent, bringing history to an end, and touching off the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, a new heaven and earth. This just does not make sense. Judas had departed, and Jesus knew that in all probability he had not many hours to live. Was the new covenant to operate for merely a few hours, or a few days, or a “short interval”?⁵⁸

This is a powerful argument, one that to my knowledge has never been rebutted by advocates of Schweitzer’s reconstruction. If Jesus did indeed think that the end of the world would coincide with his death, or even that it would take place a few days thereafter, then it would be nonsense—especially in a Jewish context—for him to compare his actions to the covenant established by Moses at Sinai, which had lasted for well over a thousand years. By contrast, once we dispense with the idea that Jesus expected the immediate end of the world and entertain the possibility that he expected history to continue after his death—however long that may be—then both his commands to repeat his actions in memory of him and his establishment of a new covenant make good sense.

Should there be any doubt about the problems caused by the words of institution for the hypothesis of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet of the immediate end, it is striking to note how, over the course of the last century, scholarly advocates of Schweitzer’s hypothesis consistently *ignore* the words of institution in their reconstruction of Jesus’ eschatology.⁵⁹ For example, in Schweitzer’s famous work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, he dismisses the words of institution with a single sentence.

The mysterious images which He used at the time of the distribution concerning the atoning significance of His death do not

touch the essence of the celebration, they are only discourses accompanying it.⁶⁰

Notice here that Schweitzer does not argue that the words of institution are unhistorical—the evidence for them is too strong for that—he just dismisses them as insignificant, not touching the “essence” of the Last Supper.

Along similar lines is the work of E. P. Sanders, who follows Schweitzer’s basic reconstruction of Jesus as a Jewish eschatological prophet for whom “the end was at hand.”⁶¹ Remarkably, when it comes to the Last Supper, Sanders concludes it is “almost equally certain” in historical plausibility to Jesus’ act of cleansing of the Temple, which he considers certain.⁶² However, while Sanders devotes two long chapters to Jesus’ words and deeds regarding the temple, *he completely ignores the Last Supper* and never explains how the words of institution can be reconciled with his overall reconstruction of Jesus’ eschatology.⁶³

Last, but certainly not least, there is the work Dale Allison, one of the most brilliant and persistent advocates for Schweitzer’s apocalyptic Jesus. In his most comprehensive study to date, Allison makes a powerful case for Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet of the immediate end of the world.⁶⁴ While Allison capably shows that eschatological concepts such as the kingdom of God and the Son of man are front and center in the accounts of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:24–29; Mark 14:21–25; Luke 22:14–22), he gives no detailed discussion of the words of institution.⁶⁵ Indeed, in Allison’s many writings on Jesus and eschatology, he never explains how the words of institution do or do not fit into his overall reconstruction of Jesus’ eschatology.⁶⁶

In short, it seems that the apocalyptic Jesus of the immediate end of history has proven very hard to square with the Jesus of the Last Supper. This is an interesting situation. Given the importance in Jesus research of the question of

60 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 380.

61 Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 334. (For his differences with Schweitzer, see Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 327–330).

62 Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 307.

63 See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 131–133.

64 See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 31–220.

65 The Last Supper texts are listed, but not discussed, in Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 41, 79, 178, 403.

66 See for example, Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Dale C. Allison Jr., “Jesus and the Victory of Apocalyptic,” in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 126–141; Dale C. Allison Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*; Dale C. Allison Jr., “The Eschatology of Jesus,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism: Volume I: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 267–302; Dale C. Allison Jr., “A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1994): 651–668.

his eschatological expectations, it seems that any worthwhile reconstruction of Jesus' eschatology must take into account his words and deeds at the Last Supper. To be sure, the words of institution can be dismissed as unhistorical; they can be reinterpreted so as to accommodate an imminent eschatology; but they should not simply be ignored.

IV. Jesus and the Early Church

The fourth and final issue has to do with the question of Jesus' intentions and the origin of the early church. On the one hand, in contrast to popular Christian belief, many scholars conclude that Jesus himself did *not* intend to found a church. Indeed, any talk of such an intention on his part is commonly viewed as anachronistic. For example, the famous text in which Jesus speaks of building his "assembly" or "church" on Peter (Matt. 16:18–19) is widely ignored or regarded as unhistorical by most works on Jesus.

On the other hand, several scholars have argued that the eucharistic words of institution, when situated in the context of ancient Jewish hopes for the restoration of Israel, *do* reveal an intention on Jesus' part both to replace the Jerusalem Temple cult with his own sacrificial meal and, in this way, to begin a new community. From this perspective, a case can be made that at the Last Supper Jesus deliberately founded a new cult, one focused on the sacrifice of his own body and blood that would establish a new "covenant."

The Question of Jesus and the Church

The first of these two positions—that Jesus did not intend to found any kind of enduring community and that it is anachronistic to speak of him instituting the church—is widely attested. In 1902, it found its classic formulation in the work of the French biblical scholar Alfred Loisy, who famously asserted:

It is certain, for instance, that Jesus did not systematize beforehand the constitution of the Church as that of a government established on earth and destined to endure for a long series of centuries ... *Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came.*⁶⁷

Although this last line has often been taken out of context, it became, over the course of the twentieth century, an influential way of summing up the discontinuity between the intentions of the historical Jesus and the actual effects of his ministry. Indeed, many recent studies, if they take up the question of Jesus and the church at all, often declare—usually in no uncertain terms—that he did not intend to found

⁶⁷ Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans.

any kind of community that would live on after his death. Consider, for example, the following:

[T]here arise most serious doubts as to whether the historical Jesus himself really did speak these words [to Peter about the building of the church]. This is not only because they have no parallel in the other Gospels, and because this is the only place in the whole synoptic tradition where the word “*ekklēsia*” appears in the sense of the church as a whole ... But the authenticity of the passage in Matthew xvi is questioned chiefly because it is not easily compatible with Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God.⁶⁸

[L]et it be re-stated for a last time, if [Jesus] meant and believed what he preached ... namely, that the eternal Kingdom of God was truly at hand, he simply could not have entertained the idea of founding and setting in motion an organized society intended to endure for ages to come.⁶⁹

[E]*kklēsia* in Matt. 16:18 comes from the usage of the early church, and not from the historical Jesus ... It is difficult to imagine such a usage in the mouth of the historical Jesus.⁷⁰

Jesus cannot have spoken these words [in Matt. 16:18–19] as he did not found a church.⁷¹

In two famous passages in Matthew, Jesus is reported as speaking of his *ekklēsia* ... Both passages are probably redactional and indicative of later developments.⁷²

It should be clear from statements such as these that many modern biblical scholars, even those who are otherwise disposed to affirm many of the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels as historically reliable, reject the notion that the Jesus of history intended to found a church of any kind. Note in particular that Bornkamm and Vermes (see above quotes) reject the idea that Jesus instituted any kind of ecclesial community because they believe that Jesus expected an imminent coming of the kingdom of God (similar to the view of Loisy).

68 Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 187.

69 Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 214.

70 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:232, 233.

71 Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years*, 198.

72 Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 513.

Indeed, many recent books on the historical Jesus show their allegiance to the idea that Jesus did not intend to found a church by simply ignoring the question altogether. One searches the indexes of a remarkable number of major works on Jesus in vain for any discussion of whether or not he intended to found a community in the wake of his death.⁷³ Hand in hand with the apocalyptic Jesus of the imminent end of history, the non-ecclesial Jesus also seems to have largely won the day.

The Problem of the Cultic Words of Jesus

One problem with this “non-ecclesial” view is that it fails to take seriously the evidence for Jesus’ intentions implicit in the accounts the Last Supper. For example, in all four accounts, Jesus explicitly speaks of a “covenant” that is centered on the sacrifice of his own blood, not the covenant sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Moreover, in the Synoptic accounts this covenant is not established with just anyone, but with “the twelve” disciples who represent the nucleus of a new Israel that is bound together by the blood of Jesus rather than the blood of Jacob the patriarch (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14, 28–30).⁷⁴

In light of this evidence, a number of studies over the course of the last century have concluded that Jesus did in fact intend to establish a new covenant in his own blood and a new community in the persons of the twelve disciples. Although the following articulations are lengthy, they are worth citing in full:

73 For example, in many reconstructions of Jesus’ life, the famous passage in which Jesus speaks of “building” the “church” (*ekklesia*) on the disciple Peter (Matt. 16:16–19) is treated almost as if it did not exist. The following major works on Jesus simply ignore the evidence that Jesus intended to “build” his *ekklesia* on Peter and his disciples, leaving the reader to come to his or her own (negative) conclusion: Allison, *Constructing Jesus*; David R. Flusser, with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews*; Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*; Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*; Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*; Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, etc. Other scholars will briefly mention Matt. 16:16–19 as the source of Simon’s being renamed “Peter,” but either dismiss or ignore Jesus’ express statements about building his *ekklesia* on Peter. See, for example, Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 186–187; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 146–147; Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 186–187. As always, there are exceptions. See, for example, Michael J. Wilkins, “Peter’s Declaration concerning Jesus’ Identity at Caesarea Philippi,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 247 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 292–381; Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 331 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 155–161.

74 On Jesus and the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:153; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 101–102; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 300; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 97; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 234. See also Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, throughout.

If Jesus understood his Messiah-ship in the sense of Daniel 7, this will open up new vistas when we are considering the nature and the importance of his founding of the Church. For the Son of Man in Daniel is not a mere individual: he is the representative of 'the people of the saints of the Most High' and has set himself the task of making this people of God, the *ekklēsia*, a reality. *From this point of view, the so-called institution of the Lord's Supper can be shown to be the formal founding of the Church.*⁷⁵

The decisive saying for the connection of the message of a crucified Messiah with the reconstituted People of God is to be found in the words of institution at the Last Supper, and particularly in the use of the word *diatheke* ["covenant"] ... *If we may look for any one moment wherein the new Israel was constituted, it would be in the act of Jesus at the Last Supper.*⁷⁶

In the time of Jesus the sectaries of Qumran regarded themselves as the people of the new covenant. The idea, therefore, of a covenant as the foundation charter (so to speak) of the people of God was very much alive at the time, and *there can be no doubt what Jesus had in mind when he invited his followers to drink of the cup of the covenant: he was formally installing them as foundation members of the new people of God.*⁷⁷

*By the command 'Do this' (Luke 22.19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25) he enjoined the continuation of this fellowship in his absence and endowed it with a distinctive social and cultic act. This was to be the visible unifying factor of a community otherwise remaining scattered throughout Israel ... Until the definitive gathering of the saved at the end of time the aims of Jesus would be incarnated in this community, at once the remnant and the first fruits of messianic Israel.*⁷⁸

[T]he twelve disciples were probably looked upon by Jesus as the nucleus of the restored people of God in an eschatological sense. The choosing of the twelve took place during Jesus' Galilean

75 Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *The Church*, trans. J. R. Coates (London: SCM, 1950 [orig. 1935]), 39–40 (emphasis added). Here Schmidt is following F. Kattenbusch, "Der Quellort der Kirchenidee," in *Festgabe von fachgenossen und freunden A. von Harnack zum siebzigsten geburtstag dargebracht* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1921), 143–172, espec. 171.

76 R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church* (London: Epworth, 1938), 71, 76 (emphasis added).

77 C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 96.

78 Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 219 (emphasis added).

ministry. The interesting point now to note is that the *definitive* constitution of this new people of God *in nuce* was done in proleptic manner *at the Last Supper*.⁷⁹

The symbolic action against the temple cult was complemented by Jesus' symbolic action at the last supper in founding a cult, though he did not intend to found a cult which would last through time. He simply wanted to replace provisionally the temple cult which had become obsolete: Jesus offers the disciples a replacement for the official cult in which they could either no longer take part, or which would not bring them salvation—until a new temple came. This 'substitute' was a simple meal. By a new interpretation, the last supper becomes a substitute for the temple cult—a pledge of the eating and drinking in the kingdom of God which is soon to dawn.⁸⁰

Three aspects of these proposals are worth highlighting.

First, the question of Jesus' self-understanding and the question of his intentions are inextricably bound up with one another.⁸¹ For if Jesus saw himself as the messianic head of a "new" Israel, then one of his key tasks will be to gather the eschatological community.

Second, insofar as the Last Supper was intended to function as a unifying event among the twelve disciples, it would have the effect of creating an eschatological community. In other words, the Last Supper is not just a sign of the restoration of Israel, but to a certain extent, the very *means* by which Jesus unifies the community of followers that would exist in his absence.⁸²

Third, the presence of the language of a "covenant" at the Last Supper is implicitly but undeniably cultic. In a Jewish context, such language would have enormous implications. Indeed, as a number of scholars have suggested recently, when Jesus' demonstration in the Temple and the Last Supper are taken together, they may suggest that he intended to replace the atoning cult of the Jerusalem Temple with the atoning cult of his own sacrifice, embodied in the eucharist.⁸³ In

79 Kim Huat Tan, *The Zion Traditions and the Aims of Jesus*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 217.

80 Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 434 (emphasis added).

81 As Schmidt says elsewhere: "The question whether Jesus himself founded the Church is really the question concerning his Messiahship." Schmidt, *The Church*, 41.

82 See also Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1984), 9–12, 23–26; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 167–170.

83 See, for example, Brant Pitre, "Jesus, the New Temple, and the New Priesthood," *Letter & Spirit* 4 (2008): 47–83, espec. 63–82; McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 325–328; Jostein Ådna, *Jesu Stellung zum Tempel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen:

short, the messianic Jesus, as head of a new community, and the eucharistic Jesus, as the founder of a new cultic rite, lead directly to the ecclesial Jesus, the founder of a community unified by his leadership and his covenant.

If any of the suggestions listed above are correct, then Jesus' actions at the Last Supper do not cohere well with the overly simplistic (but quite common) picture of an eschatological prophet who had no intentions of establishing any community that would survive him. To the contrary, when the words and deeds of Jesus are interpreted within the context of ancient Judaism, a case can be made that he not only awaited the eschatological restoration of the people of Israel, he deliberately established the nucleus of a new Israel precisely by means of the Last Supper. At the very least, the question of Jesus' intentions cannot simply be decided on the basis of an evaluation of Jesus' words to Peter at Caesarea Philippi; the accounts of the Last Supper must be taken into account. As A. J. B. Higgins aptly stated in his study of the Lord's Supper:

*The cleavage of opinion as to whether Jesus did or did not 'found' the Church has its counterpart in the debate on the origin of the Eucharist. Was it deliberately 'instituted' by Jesus himself, or is it a natural and perhaps inevitable development which began in the earliest days of the Church, but which Jesus had neither foreseen nor intended? These two questions of the Church and the Eucharist are inseparably connected, just as it is impossible to isolate Israel and the Passover from one another.*⁸⁴

In other words, if Jesus did indeed institute a new cultic ritual to be performed after his death by his twelve disciples as the sign of a new covenant with the new Israel, then, on some level, he certainly envisioned a community that would perform the ritual. And if he did indeed intend to replace the Jerusalem Temple cult with the sacrificial banquet of the coming kingdom of God, then the whole question of the opposition between the kingdom and the church posed by Loisy at the start

Mohr-Siebeck, 2000), 2.119; Jostein Ådna, "Jesus' Symbolic Action in the Temple (Mark 11:15-17): The Replacement of the Sacrificial Cult by His Atoning Death," in *Gemeinde ohne Tempel*, eds. Beate Ego, Armin Lange, and Peter Pilhofer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 461-473; Bruce D. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 248-257; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 557-563; Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1992); Jacob Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah's Explanation," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 287-290 (here 290).

84 A. J. B. Higgins, *The Lord's Supper in the New Testament* (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson; Alva: Robert Cunningham and Sons, 1952), 9. For similar sentiments, see Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 15: "[T]he historical authenticity of the establishment of the eucharist as a permanent institution depends not only on whether the meal was really a Passover supper celebrated on the correct date ..., but also on whether [Jesus] ever envisaged the creation of an enduring church." See also Rudolf Pesch, "Das Abendmahl, Jesu Todesverständnis und die Konstitution der Kirche," in *Das Abendmahl und Jesu Todesverständnis* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), 112-125.

of the century needs to be reexamined. If what Jesus intended for his followers is important, then the quest for the historical Jesus must pay serious attention to the question of what he did and said—and hence, what he intended—at the Last Supper.

Conclusions

Although contemporary Jesus research is dominated by the four questions of Jesus' relationship to Judaism, his self-understanding, his eschatological outlook, and his intentions toward the community of his followers, and while the words and deeds of Jesus at the Last Supper have a direct bearing on each of these questions, a remarkable number of major scholarly reconstructions have failed to integrate the Last Supper into their overall portraits of the historical figure of Jesus.

If the accounts of the "eucharistic" words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels are historically plausible, then at least four preliminary implications follow for contemporary research.

First, scholarship needs to clarify how it is that the Jewish Jesus and the eucharistic Jesus can be reconciled with one another. One way forward—keeping in mind the patently Jewish context of the scene—is to recognize elements of both *continuity* and *discontinuity* in Jesus' words and deeds at the Last Supper. To take but one example: the very *Jewish* belief that "the life is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11), which is the rationale behind the prohibition of drinking animal blood in the Old Testament, provides a plausible explanation for why drinking the blood of Jesus is necessary. Unless one drinks the "blood" of the "Son of man," one has no *eschatological* "life" (John 6:53–56). In other words, far from undermining the Jewish Jesus, the complex combination of continuity and discontinuity in an eschatological context has a great deal of explanatory power in clarifying how Jesus the Jew could have ever uttered such words. It is only as a Jew that his eucharistic words makes sense.

Second, along similar lines, if contemporary Jesus research wants to take the accounts of the Last Supper as actual history, it needs to seriously reconsider what Martin Hengel and Raymond Brown referred to as the "dogma" of the "non-messianic Jesus." No mere *prophet* of Israel, however great, ever saw his own "blood" as having the power to establish the eschatological "covenant" that would inaugurate the year of the forgiveness of sins (see Jer. 31:31–33; Ezek. 16:59–63). Far more plausibly, the Jesus of the Last Supper accounts is, christologically speaking, a *self-referential* Jesus. He not only proclaims the coming of the kingdom, he places himself and his own sacrificial death at the center and head of that coming kingdom. This makes perfect sense if Jesus sees himself as the king of the kingdom of God (see Dan. 7:13–15); it makes no historical sense whatsoever if Jesus thinks of himself as merely its herald.

Third, the now aging, exegetically myopic portrait of Jesus the "apocalyptic prophet" of the imminent "end of the world" made so influential by Albert

Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann not only needs to be reconsidered, it needs to be completely retooled. On the one hand—as I have argued at length elsewhere—it is certainly the case that Jesus drew upon and spoke in the language of Jewish “apocalyptic”—especially as found in the book of Daniel.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the evidence in the Last Supper accounts where Jesus saw himself as instituting a new “covenant” (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25) simply cannot be reconciled with the simplistic reconstruction in which he expected the destruction of the cosmos and final judgment to coincide with or happen shortly after his own death. Instead, as T. F. Glasson showed some time ago, Jesus’ words about instituting a new covenant presuppose at the very least a “substantial interim period” during which this new covenant, like the old covenants before it, would function.⁸⁶

Fourth and finally, but by no means least significantly, the widespread assumption that it is almost historically meaningless to ask whether Jesus intended to found an “assembly” (Greek *ekklēsia*; Hebrew *qahal*) needs to be radically called into question by the undeniably *cultic* character of Jesus’ words of institution (drawing, as he does, upon the temple language of sacrifice; see Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). If Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper are understood as a deliberate effort to establish a new “temple,” then it seems equally clear that he expected his disciples to be united in the cultic offering of sacrifice in a manner akin to the people of the old temple. Like the Passover of old offered as a “memorial” that both united and constituted Israel (Exod. 12:14), he expected the assembly that he left behind to repeat the inaugural sign performed at the Last Supper as an act of “remembrance” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23–24).

To the extent that contemporary Jesus scholarship continues to explore the four *historical* questions of his relationship with Judaism, his self-understanding, his eschatological outlook, and his ecclesial intentions, it can also provide insights useful to the *theological* study of typology, christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. In this way, one can say that Albert Schweitzer was right: “The problem of the Lord’s Supper is the problem of the life of Jesus!”⁸⁷

85 See Brant J. Pitre, “Apocalypticism and Apocalyptic Teaching,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 23–33.

86 Pitre, “Apocalypticism,” 29.

87 Schweitzer, *The Problem of the Lord’s Supper*, 137.