



BEYOND BELIEF
A CRITIQUE

FRANK ARUNDELL

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F R A N K A R U N D E L L

COVER: Photo of the Total Eclipse, Aug 21 2017
on the beach in Charleston, South Carolina
by Dr. Denise Arundell-Swensen

INTRODUCTION

It was President's Day and the WSJ didn't print. It was Monday of a three day weekend so I got in the car and drove to the local food mart to pick up a daily paper for Mary to read while she enjoyed her morning coffee. We had thrown the Sunday Times away in the recycling bin the night before, but I remembered that I had not checked-out the book review section, which is the only part of the Times I read to keep up with what is new in "liberal" publishing. I retrieved the issue from the trash-bin upon my return.

In this issue there was a review of Bart Ehrman's new book *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World*, written by Tom Bissell, a West Coast writer. "Bissell writes for *Harper's Magazine*, *Slate*, *The New Republic*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, where he is a contributing editor. While much of Bissell's magazine writing could be considered travel writing, his articles are more concerned with politics, history, and autobiography than tourism... In a March 2010 Observer article, he wrote about the appeal of games like Grand Theft Auto IV and his own simultaneous struggles with addiction to video games and cocaine." (Wikipedia) In 2016 Bissell wrote a travel book titled *The Apostles* which Amazon says is: "A profound and moving journey into the heart of Christianity that explores the mysterious and often paradoxical lives and legacies of the Twelve Apostles—a book both for those of the faith and for others who seek to understand Christianity from the outside in." (NYT Book Review) I suppose "objective Christianity" is the link between Bissell and Ehrman with the New York Times in between. God books sell well, which leads me to believe that many people are

continually trying to find the Deity somewhere, in my opinion, mostly somewhere beyond belief. I think everybody knows that the Bible is the best seller year after year.

I was familiar with Ehrman's work although I must admit I had not read any of it seriously. I have a pretty good library of The Teaching Companies' DVD's but generally on scientific stuff. I remember one solicitation from the Teaching Company some time ago offering a series of lectures on *How Jesus Became God* delivered by Dr. Ehrman ancillary to his book by the same name. Naively, I fired off an e-mail to the Teaching Company objecting to the title, unfairly really, because I had not read Ehrman's premise at that time. My e-mail was based on my own belief, as a Catholic, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity and God himself — based primarily, but not entirely on his own words reported in the New Testament,

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’¹⁴ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”(Matthew 16: 14-20)

One must admit, this is not Jesus precisely saying: “I am God,” but over two thousand years of Christian theology and tradition by the great saints and sages of the Christian religion and particularly of the Catholic Church, which he himself founded, have determined after centuries of perplexity and confusion, that this is exactly what Jesus’ purpose and meaning was. To bring humanity the “good news” of the Kingdom of God in truth; and to pay the price for the sins of mankind, allowing “eternal life” for those who believe and follow him. Indeed, it is the very reason for the Incarnation through Mary by the Holy Spirit for those who are graced to believe it: “*I and the Father are one*”. (John 10: 30)

By contrast this is what Amazon says of the book on its web site: “*New York Times* bestselling author and Bible expert Bart Ehrman reveals how Jesus’s divinity became dogma in the first few centuries of the early church.

The claim at the heart of the Christian faith is that Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, God. But this is not what the original disciples believed during Jesus’s lifetime—and it is not what Jesus claimed about himself. *How Jesus Became God* tells the story of an *idea* that shaped Christianity, and of the evolution of a belief that looked very different in the fourth century than it did in the first.

A master explainer of Christian history, texts, and traditions, Ehrman reveals how an *apocalyptic prophet* from the backwaters of rural Galilee crucified for crimes against the state came to be thought of as equal (not quite the right word, *equal* would make two gods) with the *one* God Almighty, Creator of all things. But how did he move from being a Jewish prophet to being God? In a book that took eight years to research and write, Ehrman sketches Jesus’s *transformation* from a human prophet to the Son of God exalted to divine status at his resurrection. Only when some of Jesus’s followers

had *visions* of him after his death—alive again—did anyone come to think that he, the prophet from Galilee, had become God. And what they meant by that was not at all what people mean today.

Written for secular historians of religion and believers alike, *How Jesus Became God* will engage anyone interested in the historical developments that led to the affirmation at the heart of Christianity: Jesus was, and is, God.” (Amazon)

It is interesting that Amazon’s sales piece opens with: “*Bible expert Bart Ehrman reveals how ‘Jesus’s divinity’ became dogma in the first few centuries of the early church.*” One would have to assume that Dr. Ehrman today, would agree that Jesus is “*divine.*” Unfortunately both for him and us that turns out not to be the case.

“*Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’*” (John 8: 58)

In this relativist society no one will object to the 63 year old learned doctor revising his religious beliefs, Bissell’s review of Ehrdman’s newest book in the Times tells it like it is:

“ ‘I used to believe absolutely everything that Bill just presented,’ the scholar Bart D. Ehrdman said during a 2006 debate with the conservative theologian William Lane Craig. ‘He and I went to the same evangelical Christian college, Wheaton, where these things are taught. ... I used to believe them with my whole heart and soul. I used to preach them and try to convince others that they were true. But then I began ... looking at them deeply myself.’”

“Ehrman, in other words, is no longer an Evangelical, or even a Christian.” This, according to Bissell.

It is no surprise that a dyed-in-the-wool evangelical such as Bart Ehrman who was taught that the texts of the bible were the *absolute* word of God, just as Muhammad’s recitations claimed to be irrefutably perfect, would eventually be confused by certain obvious biblical paradoxes. After his deep dive into the gospels it is totally understandable that his faith would be shaken since the gospels were written and copied by fallible men of a very different age as they started to evolve and become the “living word of God” we have today. Only through the thoughts of the Jewish people and faith the early Fathers were the gospels kept on a true trajectory, illuminating the truth by the power of the Holy Spirit. I’m quite sure that Ehrman studied all of them in minute scholarly detail. Of course if there is no Spirit there is no argument regardless of the early Fathers. As Ehrman advanced in his studies he went from preacher to biblical-historian, and became an exceptional one at that.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16: 12-15)

In other words, despite translations and semantic anomalies and regardless of the passage of time— you will hear the “good news,” the *gospel-truth* from the Father through the Son in the Spirit by the grace of the Trinitarian God. The full text of John 8: 54 says:

“‘Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?’⁵⁴ Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, “He is our God,”⁵⁵ though you do not know him. But I know him; if I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word.⁵⁶ Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.’⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’” (John 8: 54-58)

In his studies Dr. Ehrman now offers very good reasons why much of the biblical writing doesn't make sense from a historical standpoint for himself and many others of the current academic community engaged in serious biblical epistemology. We should clip Bart's pedigree from Wikipedia at this point:

“*Bart Denton Ehrman*; was born October 5, 1955. He is an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament, the *historical Jesus*, and the development of early Christianity. He has written and edited 30 books, including three college textbooks. He has also authored five *New York Times* bestsellers. He is currently the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of *Religious Studies* at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.” (Wikipedia)

It troubles me a bit that that Professor Ehrman who has presumably lost his faith in Jesus as the God-man, and is now a self identified agnostic is teaching young people, some of whom may be trying to hold on to their faith in Jesus as God-and-man; a rudimentary belief in most Christian quarters, may have their faith shaken by his views. It would take more than a

meager 20 or so pages to critique Dr. Ehrman's eight year study of *How Jesus became God*, and surely much more scholarship than I am able to muster. Still, I feel a compunction to do so. I am girded by the Savior himself to make an attempt with these words in mind:

“At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’” (Matthew 11: 25)

I will definitely need to use the work of some of the greatest champions of faith in these difficult post modern times when secular ethics and the empirical sciences are continually challenging the grace filled, transcendental belief of people of faith in the interest of science; the purpose of which, of course, is ultimately to seek verifiable truth. Two are late Popes of the Roman Catholic Church; Saint John Paul II, d. Apr. 2 2005 (Karol Józef Wojtyła) and Benedict XVI emeritus (Joseph Ratzinger) Both of these men have spent their entire lives in the love of God serving the Word of God (Jesus Christ) as given in the Gospels. Another individual: Dom Henry Wansbrough, editor of my worn pocket-edition of *The New Jerusalem Bible*, provides all the valuable information on the Gospels anyone might need in his marvelous book: *Introducing the New Testament*.

On the morning I decided to go to work on this essay I checked the e-mail as usual and discovered FIRST THINGS Magazine had posted a piece by Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., archbishop of Philadelphia, on the twentieth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's Encyclical: *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason, 1998) from the March issue of the magazine. I

distinctly remember the encyclical having a very great influence on me along with his earlier encyclical: *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth, 1993.) Here's what Archbishop Chaput said:

“John Paul wrote *Fides et Ratio* quite deliberately as a sequel to, and further development of, his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (“The Splendor of Truth”). They’re closely linked. But in *Fides et Ratio*, the pope seeks especially to concentrate on the theme of *truth* itself and on its *foundation* in relation to *faith*. For it is undeniable that this time of rapid and complex change can leave especially the younger generation, to whom the future belongs and on whom it depends, with a sense that they have no valid points of reference. The need for a *foundation* for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time when . . . *the real meaning of life* is cast into doubt. This is why many people stumble through life to the very edge of the abyss without knowing where they are going.” (First Things Magazine Online, from the March 2018 print edition.)

I don't think there's any doubt that the erudite theology and easy style of Joseph Ratzinger can be detected in both JPII's great encyclicals. If you haven't read them you may be missing something very important. As a Cardinal, Ratzinger served the Lord, the Church, and JPII as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005, the year he became Pope Benedict XVI following the former's death. I will try to use his epic three volume set *Jesus of Nazareth* to call into question some of Professor Ehrdman's findings and conclusions.

“Humans are made to seek the truth. All knowledge requires a framework of preexisting belief to provide it with *coherence*.

Rejecting the traditional philosophical foundations of Western culture gives rise to a *spiritual turmoil* that science, technology, and prosperity can't quell. And when the soul is deprived of truth, it turns to toxic substitutes." (Charles Chaput)

There has always been much more arrogance than scholarship with the Arundell's, but with the help of these men and others, perhaps we may please the Lord a little and inform a few others with these few pages. I hope so.

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A CRITIQUE

The title of this essay *Beyond Belief* are words expressing certain meanings which should conform to a core-idea that is intelligible, but they can be understood in many different ways according to the determination of a hearer. Let's consider a few ways in which *Beyond Belief* may be understood.

1. A given belief is so far beyond the understanding of the hearer that its comprehension is impossible.
2. A given belief when clearly understood by a hearer is rejected as not conforming to his or her own understanding.
3. A given belief *of itself* is incomprehensible as to even qualify as something that could be believed by any hearer.
4. A given belief is so easily understood that a hearer can summarily dismiss it and go beyond it and instantiate her own belief .

Belief is defined as *any cognitive content held to be true*. Since we are hopefully dealing with *truth* here I suppose it would be reasonable to assume that a believer is a person, who is being honest with himself or herself, affirming the truth of a particular belief. As the Greeks said: "Know thyself, " or as with Shakespeare, "To thine own self be true"... Freedom is vitally important to truth as truth is to freedom. For an "honest" person, it is difficult to imagine that anyone would *knowingly* believe what is false to be true; even though the difference between what is true and false may be quite narrow, what is false, most always leads to instability and chaos and falls of its own weight.

Falling for the lie is mankind's first infraction against freedom. It was explained to us metaphorically in Paradise: "If you eat of this apple, you'll be like God!" Our intrepid couple wanted *more* than what they were already given. Regardless of the *true* fact that they were already much like God, it wasn't enough for them. In my understanding we are all born with the knowledge of God as well as with the freedom to reject God. For our first-parents chaos soon ensued and they and their future family wound up hoping for a return to paradise forever after. Since the days of Genesis the temptation for self-centered, anxious people (that would be most of us) to succumb to the "lie" has greatly expanded. We see it every day of our lives in a thousand different ways. Skepticism, i.e., the disbelief of any claims to ultimate knowledge, particularly of what is true, over time, has morphed into relativism where we each can say that *truth* is what ever we want it to be. Under this gross and destructive misunderstanding of what freedom really is, we are witnessing the massive incoherency of these "post-modern" times.

How can one know and accept what is true in this universe of an interconnected "multicultural" psychology? Is truth a relative value allowing each of us to freely determine what it is for our selves or for a larger group of people with like beliefs?

This essay is a critique of Bart Ehrdman's and other's conclusion that Jesus was made god by men or "mankind," after his death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans in Jerusalem. In his book *How Jesus Became God*, Professor Ehrdman has admitted to his readers that from a serious minded Evangelical believer he has become an agnostic with regard to Jesus as God—the Trinitarian One God most Christians believe. We've got to credit Dr. Ehrdman for being honest because if any agnostic knows only one thing, it is that he or

she knows— he or she doesn't know. For such a high powered academic to admit he doesn't know something in his own course of study is rare. Dr. Ehrman said:

“As an agnostic, I now think of Jesus as a true religious genius with brilliant insights. But he was also very much a man of his time. And his time was an age of *full-throated apocalyptic fervor*. Jesus participated in this first-century Palestinian Jewish milieu. He was born and raised in it, and it was the context within which he conducted his public ministry. Jesus taught that the age he lived in was controlled by forces of evil but that God would soon intervene to destroy everything and everyone opposed to him. God would then bring in a good, utopian kingdom on earth, where there would be no more pain and suffering. Jesus himself would be the ruler of this kingdom, with his twelve disciples serving under him. And all this was to happen very soon—within his own generation.” (How Jesus Became God: p. 354 Kindle Edition.)

On page 93 of the book under the sub head *Methods*, Ehrdman begins to briefly tell us about the methods New Testament scholars devised to deal with early material to help make their case; but admits that we really only have the Gospels as our chief source, he says:

“I should stress that the Gospels are in fact virtually our only available sources. We do not have any accounts of Jesus from Greek or Roman (pagan) sources of the first century, no mention even of his name until more than eighty years after his death. Among non-Christian Jewish sources we have only two brief comments by the Jewish historian Josephus. We do have other Gospels from outside the New Testament, but these were all written later than the New Testament Gospels and as a rule are highly legendary in character. There are a couple of Gospels

that may provide us with some additional information—such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter, both discovered in modern times—but at the end of the day they actually do not give us much. And so we more or less have our four Gospels... Nearly everyone agrees that even though these canonical Gospels are highly problematic as sources for the historical Jesus, they nonetheless do contain some historically accurate recollections of what he said, did, and experienced amid all the embellishments and changes. The question is how to ferret out the historically accurate information from the later alterations and inventions.” (How Jesus Became God: p. 94)

I think it is fair to say that any conclusive resolution of this matter is well beyond the mental capacity of any known human mind, no less to establish historical accuracy of the exact words Jesus used in his short time as one of us. All the scholarship and ink expended on these *sacred mysteries* since the second century, except for than the great councils of the church guided by the Holy Spirit, leaves us with nothing more than the vaguest ideas with which to cobble together “intellectual” abstractions that many “scholars” pass-off as historically verified.

Isaiah, Ambrose, Augustine, all tell us “you’ve got to believe to understand.” That is basic to the study of theology. Bible History and Bible Criticism is another story; in those categories the scholar is hopefully *searching to believe* with an uneasy mind about *truth* unfortified by precise historic facts. Yes, there is spiritual history, but history of itself is never spiritual. Let’s look at the three academic methods used by “scholars” as tools, giving them reasons to dispute the veracity of scripture as it exists today by challenging the early physical and *theological* understandings that produced the trinitarian concept of three Persons in One God, with Jesus— God, as the Second Person

of the Blessed Trinity. This is what most Christians believe by the grace of God, sadly, not all.

I will extract the three methods Professor Ehrdman gives us and use a bit of his text to explain each of them.

- 1..Criterion of independent attestation
2. Criterion of dissimilarity.
3. Criterion of contextual credibility.

Criterion of independent attestation:

“We have numerous streams of tradition that independently all go back, ultimately, to the life of Jesus. In light of this fact—taken as a fact by almost all critical scholars—we are in a position to evaluate which of the Gospel stories are more likely to be authentic than others. If a story is found in several of these independent traditions, then it is far more likely that this story goes back to the ultimate source of the tradition, the life of Jesus itself. This is called the criterion of independent attestation. On the other hand, if a story—a saying, a deed of Jesus—is found in only one source, it cannot be corroborated independently, and so it is less likely to be authentic.”

Criterion of dissimilarity:

“It states that if a tradition about Jesus is dissimilar to what the early Christians would have wanted to say about him, then it more likely is historically accurate.”

“Let me illustrate. Jesus is said to have grown up in Nazareth in Mark, M, L, and John; so it is multiply attested. But it also is not a story that a Christian would have been inclined to make up, because it proved to be an embarrassment to later Christians. Nazareth was a small village—a hamlet, really—that no one had ever heard of. Who would invent the idea that the Son of God came from there? It’s hard to see any reason for

someone to make it up, so Jesus probably really did come from there. A second example: the idea that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist proved discomfoting for Christians, because John was baptizing people to show that their sins had been forgiven (“for the remission of sins,” as the New Testament puts it). Moreover, everyone knew in the early church that the person doing the baptizing was spiritually superior to the person being baptized. Who would make up a story of the Son of God being baptized because of his sins, or in which someone else was shown to be his superior? If no one would make up the story, why do we have it? Because Jesus really was baptized by John.”

Criterion of contextual credibility:

“Scholars are especially keen to consider whether traditions about Jesus can actually fit in a first-century Palestinian Jewish context. Some of the later Gospels from outside the New Testament portray Jesus teaching views that are starkly different from what we can plausibly situate in Jesus’s own historical and cultural milieu. Such teachings cannot obviously be accepted as ones that a first-century Palestinian Jew would have spoken.”

“This final criterion insists that we understand Jesus’s historical context if we want to understand what he said and did during his life. Any time you take something out of context, you misunderstand it. For situating any historical personage, context is everything.”

One need not enumerate Joseph Ratzinger’s academic credentials here, but I am sure we would be on solid footing were we to stack up Benedict XVI credentials against Professor Ehrdman’s. We’ve picked up a few pages from the forward of his trilogy: *Jesus of Nazareth*. Hopefully this will shed a

different light on Jesus' status as a prophet, Son of God, Son of Man, or God— the second person of the Blessed Trinity.

From Jesus of Nazareth:

“When I was growing up— in the 1930s and 1940s— there was a series of inspiring books about Jesus: Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michel Willam, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops were just some of the authors one could name. All of these books based their portrayal of Jesus Christ on the Gospels. They presented him as a man living on earth who, fully human though he was, at the same time brought God to men, the God with whom as Son he was One. Through the man Jesus, then, God was made visible, and hence our eyes were able to behold the perfect man.” (Like us in every way save sin)

“But the situation started to change in the 1950s. The gap between the ‘historical Jesus’ and the ‘Christ of faith’ grew wider and the two visibly fell apart. But what can faith in Jesus as the Christ possibly mean, in Jesus as the Son of the living God, if the man Jesus was so completely different from the picture that the Evangelists painted of him and that the Church, on the evidence of the Gospels, takes as the basis of her preaching?”

“As *historical-critical* scholarship advanced, it led to finer and finer distinctions between layers of tradition in the Gospels, beneath which the real object of faith— the figure [Gestalt] of Jesus— became increasingly obscured and blurred. At the same time, though, the reconstructions [re-contextualizations] of this Jesus (who could only be discovered by going behind the *traditions and sources* used by the Evangelists) became more and more incompatible with one another: at one end of the

spectrum, Jesus was the anti-Roman revolutionary working—though finally failing—to overthrow the ruling powers; at the other end, he was the meek moral teacher who approves everything and unaccountably comes to grief. *If you read a number of these reconstructions [re-contextualizations] one after the other, you see at once that far from uncovering an icon that has become obscured over time, they are much more like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold.* Since then there has been growing skepticism about these portrayals of Jesus, but the figure of Jesus himself has for that very reason receded even further into the distance.”

“All these attempts have produced a common result: the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did *faith* in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.”

“Rudolf Schnackenburg was probably the most prominent Catholic exegete writing in German during the second half of the twentieth century. It is clear that toward the end of his life, this crisis surrounding the faith made a profound impression on him. In view of the inadequacy of all the portrayals of the ‘historical’ Jesus offered by recent exegesis, he strove to produce one last great work: *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*. The book is intended to help believing Christians ‘who today have been made insecure by scientific research and critical discussion, so that they may hold fast to faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the bringer of salvation and Savior of the world’ (p. x). At the end of the book, Schnackenburg sums up the result of a lifetime of scholarship: ‘a reliable view of the

historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth through scientific effort with historical-critical methods can be only inadequately achieved' (p. 316); 'the efforts of scientific exegesis to examine these traditions and trace them back to what is historically credible' draw us 'into a continual discussion of tradition and redaction history that never comes to rest'" (p. 318).

"His own account of the figure of Jesus suffers from a certain unresolved tension because of the constraints of the method he feels bound to use, despite its inadequacies. Schnackenburg shows us the Gospels' image of Christ, but he considers it to be the product of manifold layers of tradition, through which the 'real' Jesus can only be glimpsed from afar. He writes: 'The historical ground is presupposed but is superseded in the faith-view of the evangelists' (p. 321). Now, no one doubts that; what remains unclear is how far the 'historical ground' actually extends. That said, Schnackenburg does clearly throw into relief the decisive point, which he regards as a genuinely historical insight: Jesus' relatedness to God and his closeness to God (p. 322). 'Without anchoring in God, the person of Jesus remains shadowy, unreal, and unexplainable'"

"The problem with Schnackenburg's account of the relationship between New Testament traditions and historical events stands out very clearly for me when he writes that the Gospels 'want, as it were, to clothe with flesh the mysterious Son of God who appeared on earth' (p. 322). I would like to say in response that they did not need to 'clothe him with flesh,' because he had already truly taken flesh. Of course, the question remains: Can this flesh be accessed through the dense jungle of traditions? Joseph Ratzinger: (Pope Benedict XVI emeritus) *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* . The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Several others we have read more recently are:

“**Joseph Henry Wansbrough** (1934 -) is Cathedral Prior of Norwich (2004–present), Magister Scholarum of the English Benedictine Congregation (2001–present), Member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1997–2007), Chairman of the Trustees of the Catholic Biblical Association (1996–present), and Emeritus Member of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oxford (1990–present). He is Alexander Jones Professor of Biblical Studies within the Department of Theology, Philosophy and Religious studies at Liverpool Hope University. From 1990 until 2004 he was Master of St Benet's Hall, the Benedictine Permanent Private Hall of the University. He was General Editor of the *New Jerusalem Bible*. He has written twenty books, more than sixty articles, around ninety book reviews, an edition of the Synoptic Gospels, with an accompanying textbook, for 'A'-Level students, and more than fifty electronic booklets, essays, and lectures, as well as editing, co-editing, and translating other volumes. Today he resides at Ampleforth UK,” (Wikipedia)

“**Raymond Edward Brown SS** was an American Catholic priest, a member of the Sulpician Fathers and a prominent biblical scholar. He was regarded as a specialist concerning the hypothetical ‘Johannine community’ which he speculated contributed to the authorship of the Gospel of John, and he also wrote influential studies on the birth and death of Jesus. Brown was professor emeritus at Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York where he taught for 29 years. He was the first Catholic professor to gain tenure there, where he earned a reputation as a superior lecturer.”

“Fr. Brown was one of the first Catholic scholars to apply historical-critical analysis to the Bible. As biblical criticism

developed in the 19th century, the Catholic Church opposed this scholarship and essentially forbade it in 1893 (Leo XIII). In 1943 (Pius XII), however, the Church issued the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which authorized Catholic scholars to investigate the Bible historically. Brown called this encyclical the ‘Magna Carta of biblical progress.’ The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) further supported the method of higher criticism, which, Brown felt, vindicated his approach. Brown remains controversial among traditionalist Catholics because of their claim that he denied the inerrancy of the whole of scripture and cast doubt on the historical accuracy of numerous articles of the Catholic faith. Some conservatives were angered at his questioning of whether the virginal conception of Jesus could be proven historically. He was regarded as occupying the center ground in the field of biblical studies, opposing the literalism found among many fundamentalist Christians while not carrying his conclusions as far as many other scholars.” (Wikipedia) Fr. Brown died in 1998 at 70, RIP.

“ **Fr. John Paul Meier** (1942 -) is an American biblical scholar and Roman Catholic priest. He is author of the series *A Marginal Jew, Five volumes: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (5 v.), six other books, and more than 70 articles for peer-reviewed or solicited journals or books. He attended St. Joseph's Seminary and College (B.A., 1964), Gregorian University Rome (S.T.L., 1968), and the Biblical Institute Rome (S.S.D., 1976). Meier is William K. Warren Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. His fields include biblical studies and Christianity and Judaism in antiquity. Before coming to Notre Dame, he was professor of New Testament at the Catholic University of America." (Wikipedia)

Fr. Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D. “President and Executive Director of the Loyola Institute for Spirituality in Orange, CA. After receiving his Doctorate in New Testament Studies from Yale University, he taught at Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles), the University of San Francisco, and Santa Clara University. He was also director of the Center for Religion and Spirituality at LMU, and dean of the Lay Ecclesial Ministry and Deacon Formation programs for the Diocese of Las Vegas. He regularly teaches in the "Ecclesia" program of Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles, and the Catholic Bible Institutes of several dioceses in California.” His blog *ENTER* is well worth looking into for anybody interested in the Bible.

In my view the different positions than those of Dr. Ehrdman’s are well expressed by these men. On the jacket of Schnackenburg’s book Fr. Meier suggests that in Schnackenburg’s view “a truly *historical portrait is unattainable because the primary sources written about were not historical records as such.*” *What is attainable, however is a faith interpretation of Jesus’ life and works, gleaned from the writings of those closest to the life of Christ; the four gospels. Schnackenburg provides a full faith interpretation of Jesus as each Gospel community portrayed him. Numerous commonalities about Jesus among these Gospels are revealed, and a fully recognizable portrait emerges.*”

Historical documents are *original* documents that contain important historical information about a person, place, or event and can thus serve as *primary-sources*, important ingredients of the historical methodology. As far as we know the Apostles did not leave us with any original documents that can be called “historical” as the name implies.

“Studies of the Old and New Testaments were often independent of each other, largely due to the difficulty of any single scholar having a sufficient grasp of the many languages required or of the cultural background for the different periods in which texts had their origins.”

“Biblical criticism, defined as *the treatment of biblical texts as natural rather than supernatural artifacts*, grew out of the rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century it was divided between the higher criticism, the study of the composition and history of biblical texts, and lower criticism, the close examination of the text to establish their original or "correct" readings. These terms are largely no longer used, and contemporary criticism has seen the rise of new perspectives which draw on literary and multidisciplinary sociological approaches to address the meaning(s) of texts and the wider world in which they were written or conceived.”

“A division is still sometimes made between historical criticism and literary criticism. Historical criticism seeks to locate the text in history: it asks such questions as when the text was written, who the author/s might have been, and what history might be reconstructed from the answers. Literary criticism asks what audience the authors wrote for, their presumptive purpose, and the development of the text over time.”

“Historical criticism was the dominant form of criticism until the late 20th century, when biblical critics became interested in questions aimed more at *the meaning of the text* than its origins and developed methods drawn from mainstream literary criticism. The distinction is frequently referred to as one between *diachronic* and *synchronic* forms of criticism, the former concerned the development of texts through time, the latter treating texts as they exist at a particular moment,

frequently the so-called ‘final form,’ meaning the Bible text as we have it today.” (Wikipedia: Biblical criticism)

There are over twenty different methods and perspectives of Biblical criticism touched on in Wikipedia (a good source) being conducted today. Unfortunately there isn’t enough room in one small booklet to copy them all for you. It is good here, to gyp once again from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, The future Pope said:

“I feel that I owe the reader these remarks about methodology, because they govern my interpretation of the figure of Jesus in the New Testament. The main implication of this for my portrayal of Jesus is that I trust the Gospels. Of course, I take for granted everything that the Council and modern exegesis tell us about literary genres, about authorial intention, and about the fact that the Gospels were written in the context, and speak within the living milieu, of communities. I have tried, to the best of my ability, to incorporate all of this, and yet I wanted to try to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, ‘historical’ Jesus in the strict sense of the word. I am convinced, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades. I believe that this Jesus— the Jesus of the Gospels— is a historically plausible and convincing figure.”

“Unless there had been something extraordinary in what happened, unless the person and the words of Jesus radically surpassed the hopes and expectations of the time, there is no way to explain why he was crucified or why he made such an impact. As early as twenty or so years after Jesus’ death, the great Christ-hymn of the Letter to the Philippians (cf. Phil 2: 6

– 11) offers us a fully developed Christology stating that Jesus was equal to God,* (*the phrase troubles me no matter who wrote it*) but emptied himself, became man, and humbled himself to die on the Cross, and that to him now belongs the worship of all creation, the adoration that God, through the Prophet Isaiah, said was due to him alone (cf. Is 45: 23).”

*St. Paul (Phil 2:-7) wrote:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
*did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,*
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness...”

“Critical scholarship rightly asks the question: What happened during those twenty years after Jesus’ Crucifixion? Where did this Christology come from? To say that it is the fruit of anonymous collective formulations, whose authorship we seek to discover, does not actually explain anything. How could these unknown groups be so creative? How were they so persuasive and how did they manage to prevail? Isn’t it more logical, even historically speaking, to assume that the greatness came at the beginning, and that the figure of Jesus really did explode all existing categories and could only be understood in the light of the mystery of God? *Admittedly, to believe that as man he truly was God, and that he communicated his divinity veiled in parables, yet with increasing clarity, exceeds the scope of the historical method.* Yet if instead we take this my personal search “for the face of the Lord” (cf. Ps 27: 8). Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding.” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI emeritus)

We need to stop here for a few minutes to get our bearings.

If we were Jews living in Capernaum, Galilee or Jerusalem in the years about 30 to 32 CE, chances are we would have known of, or seen Jesus the young Jew, former carpenter, who had become an itinerant preacher. He seemed to have taken over from John the “baptizer” and was preaching the need for repentance from our “evil ways” because of the coming of the end-of-the-world, the so called apocalypse. Were we living in the village of Nazareth we surely might have gotten to know Jesus’ family; his mother Mary; his father Joseph who may have made a piece of our furniture, our farm fences and perhaps the gates of our sheep-fold or the door of our house. We might even gotten to know his brothers or sisters.

Except for a few outsiders, Nazareth was predominantly a Jewish enclave. A few of the upper class there may have spoken Greek or classical Hebrew, but most would have spoken Aramaic, a guttural form of Hebrew. Perhaps we might have been invited to weddings and parties which Jesus and his family may have also attended. Certainly we would have traveled up to Jerusalem, which is really down-south, but because of the *Temple Mount* we would have said: “up.” Once a year, especially for the high holy days; we might have walked for three days with practically the whole town in caravan to the magnificent Temple— to “God’s house” for sacrifices and worship.

In Dom Henry Wansbrough’s fine book *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter three titled: The Politico-Religious Situation, Section Three-c, Apocalyptic Fervor says:

“The Jesus movement cannot be understood without reference to the *apocalyptic writings* of the time. The nature of

apocalyptic writing is discussed with reference to the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. The expectation of *divine intervention* to fashion a new world marks also the earliest writings of the New Testament (1 Thess. 4.13–5.11) and particularly 1 Corinthians 15.20–8. Much of Paul’s moral teaching is dependent on expectation of imminent divine intervention (e.g. 1 Cor. 7.26). It is voiced in the initial proclamation of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Mt. 3.2; 4.17). It forms the burden of Peter’s speech on the morning of Pentecost (Acts 2.16–21).”

“Such an expectation was widespread in the Israel of the time. It is expressed in the earliest part of the Book of Enoch (1 Enoch 17–36) already at the beginning of the second century BC, and in the allegorical description of the history of Israel, leading to the triumphant vindication of Israel (Chapters 89–90). The same expectation is vivid in the Scrolls of Qumran (e.g. the ‘Kingdom of Peace’ in 1 QS 4.8), the preparations for a final eschatological war in the War Scroll (1 QM), and in various ways in many of the Qumran fragments. In wider spheres the promise of a ‘renewed kingdom’ is rooted in the Assumption of Moses, (dated to the first decade AD). The expectation of a ‘Son of Man’ after the model of the figure in the apocalyptic description of Daniel 7.13 is the clue to much of the use of that title in the gospels, and possibly also its use on Jesus’ lips. This restoration eschatology gives a context to Jesus’ miracles of healing and forgiveness and to his choice of the Twelve to represent a renewed twelve-tribe Israel. It also makes sense of his instructions that no time is to be lost, and of the crisis nature of the parables, particularly in Mark, and similarly of the Synoptic Apocalypse in Mark 13. Finally the apocalyptic signs at the death and resurrection of Jesus, the darkness at noon and especially the two earthquakes in

Matthew, mark out that event as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel.” (Henry Wansbrough)

Let’s resume our own narrative here and try to erect a feasible construct helping us imagine ourselves living in the second-temple period along with Jesus in Roman occupied Palestine, anxious about the coming end of times.

Though we might have been very much aware of the politics of the day, especially with the Roman occupation, we would have been consumed, for the most part, with scratching out a living from the soil. Generally, most of us would have been employed on working farms or vineyards belonging to some rich landowner living off-premises. Since the end-times were said to be coming we probably would have heard about the many *baptizing’s* by John in the Jordan River, followed by Jesus traveling all over the area with a small coterie of men from Galilee teaching and performing “magical” works while large crowds followed him. If we lived near Lake Gennesaret we may have even seen him preaching at the lakeside about Salvation and the coming of the Kingdom of God to the eager groups. His messages were clear to all who heard him since he spoke mostly in little stories (parables) which all seemed relevant to our lives and times.

Seventy percent of us would have been from the middle to lower class, while thirty percent were of the upper class. Lots of us would have been relatively poor. Briefly, there were four religious-political parties among us. There were the Pharisees, Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots. Chances are we might have known a few people in each group.

“The Pharisees: The largest group, were exact observers of Mosaic Law, and preoccupied with purity regarding matters of food and life-processes, ritual baths, etc.”

“The Sadducees: We know almost nothing about now, even the origin and meaning of their name is disputed. They differed from the Pharisees particularly on rules about purity and so were accused of rejecting the oral Law. They were aristocratic, and some but not all priests were drawn from their ranks. They were concentrated in Jerusalem and practically all of them perished in the fall of that city in 70AD.”

“The Essenes: Were settled on the western shore of the Dead Sea, and hence the assumption that much of the material in the scrolls of that name found in the area of Qumran depicts their ideas. Today the scrolls provide the only reliable witness independent of the New Testament for ideas about Jesus current at the time, and often contribute notably to our understanding of the texts of the New Testament. Particularly important was their apocalyptic attitude.”

“The Zealots: The Zealots as such eventually emerge in 68AD as a group notable for their determination to expel the Romans and thus set Israel free, but political and religious motivations are often difficult to separate. A forerunner may have been Judas the Galilean, who led a rebellion against the Roman census in 6BC, on the grounds that Israel belonged to God and that payment of taxes to Rome amounted to recognizing Caesar as Lord.”

Occasionally, if we were to follow Jesus and his entourage, there would be no “news people” taking notes or recording what he was saying on their iPhones. Some or all of his people would be engaged in crowd control depending on where he was

preaching. There would be hundreds, and on occasion, thousands gathered to hear what he had to say. Many simply followed him out of curiosity— to watch him cure people of their sicknesses and diseases. We might have heard that he was even curing lepers; casting out “demons”; allowing the blind to see and the lame to walk just by his word or touch; encouraging everyone to do more than simply keep the law since the end-of-times was coming, the Kingdom of God was at hand.

Out of the four evangelists there were only two that are said to have walked with Jesus, they were Matthew the tax collector, and John the apostle “whom Jesus loved.” Two others, Mark and Luke came later. “Mark was not one of the original Apostles, and he probably never knew Jesus personally. Instead, it is thought that he was a member of the first Christian community. In his writings, St. Peter refers to him as his ‘son.’ Peter may have used this term to show his love for Mark, or he may have used it because he was the one who baptized Mark. *It is believed that Peter was the primary source for Mark’s Gospel.* Mark traveled with St’s. Paul and Barnabas to spread the Good News about Jesus’ message. During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul mentions Mark’s concern for him and writes about how helpful Mark is in the ministry of helping others to believe in Jesus (Colossians. 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11).” Mark would have been very well aware of what the apostles had witnessed.

“Although some scholars disagree, the vast majority of researchers believe that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, sometime around the year 70. This scholarly consensus holds that the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke were composed, independently of one another, sometime in the 80s or 90s. Both used a written form of the Gospel of Mark as source material for their own narratives. In addition, because both Matthew and Luke contain a large amount of material in

common that is not found in Mark, most researchers hold that both Evangelists also had a collection of Jesus' sayings that they incorporated into their works. This 'saying-source' is known as "Q" (German: Quelle = source) and was likely assembled in the 40s or 50s. This understanding of the origins of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke explains why they are similar yet different from one another. The arrangement is called 'The Two-Source Hypothesis' because Matthew and Luke are seen to have two written sources, Mark and Q." (Raymond Brown) And of course the verbal input from Peter and Matthew themselves. M and L are other sources not necessary to go into here.

"By traditional attribution, Matthew, a tax-collector among the Twelve, wrote either the Gospel or a collection of the Lord's sayings in Aramaic. Some who reject this picture allow that something written by Matthew may have made its way into the present Gospel. From the contents, another author is detectable; a Greek-speaker, who knew Aramaic or Hebrew or both but was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry drew on Mark and a collection of the sayings of the Lord (Q), as well as on other available traditions, [including Matthew's own] oral or written. He probably was a Jewish Christian." (Raymond Brown)

"As well as being firmly anchored in Judaism, Matthew is perhaps the most critical among the evangelists of the then contemporary practice of Judaism, and especially of the leadership of the Pharisees. This would fit a date towards the end of the century. After the Sack of Jerusalem in 70AD, many of the leadership-groups of the Jews (e.g. Sadducees and Essenes) were destroyed, and the Pharisees, who were a strictly religious group, were the only group that survived. Therefore the opposition to Jews who became Christians was overwhelmingly from them. Further, it has been surmised that

the Gospel of Matthew was written at Antioch, where there was a large and prosperous Jewish colony energetically persecuted and mocked by the non-Jewish population.”

(Henry Wansbrough)

In my untutored opinion, it would be hard to concede that Matthew himself was not the early, oral-and written, major source; supplying his remembrances to the gospel carrying his own name, completed by his Jewish-Christian followers at Antioch over time.

“Luke the Evangelist, was the writer of the third Gospel. He never met Christ in person, but in his Gospel he says that he came to know about Jesus by talking with eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection. (Luke 1: 2) Hearing those stories presumably helped Luke become a believer, Luke is thought to be a doctor traveling with Saint Paul on his second missionary journey. In fact, Paul calls Luke his ‘beloved physician’ (Colossians 4:14) Luke is also recognized as the author of the Acts of the Apostles.”(RCL Benzinger: Saints Resource)

“The Gospel of John emerges from an independent literary tradition that is not directly connected to the Synoptic tradition. This explains the major differences between John and the Synoptics. Traditionally this gospel has always, since the third century, been associated with John the Apostle, as have also the three Letters and the Book of Revelation. There are, however, marked differences between these writings, as well as obvious similarities, which have in more recent times resulted in being attributed not to a single individual but to *a school of writers*. The situation is further complicated by uncertainty about the composition of the gospel. During much of the twentieth century the field was dominated by the theory of Rudolf

Bultmann, who held that the gospel was finally edited by an Ecclesiastical Redactor, relying upon two sources, a Signs-Source and a Passion narrative source; in this case who would count as the author? Other important theories have been those of Raymond E. Brown, who posited five separate stages of composition, and most recently Urban von Wahlde, who has analysed the work into three major editions with some later additions.”

“The association with John is based on a reference in the (added) final chapter to a disciple ‘who vouches for these things and has written them down, and we know that this testimony is true’ (21.24). This statement may refer only to the final chapter, but it also echoes 19.35, which speaks of ‘the evidence of one who saw it, trustworthy evidence, and he knows he speaks the truth’. Both these references are to the source of the testimony rather than to literary authorship. The unnamed disciple of 21.24 is the beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus’ breast at the last supper. At the end of the second century Irenaeus voiced the tradition that the Beloved disciple was John, son of Zebedee (both sons of Zebedee were present in 21.2). Others have suggested that it was Lazarus, whom Jesus loved so tenderly (Jn 11.33–5). This Beloved Disciple appears altogether four times in the gospel, at the Last Supper, at the foot of the Cross, at the Empty Tomb and at the lakeside in John 21. It has been suggested that this is the picture of the ideal disciple, who is close to Jesus at the Eucharist, who participates in the Passion, who believes in the Resurrection and who is the source of witness and tradition, that is, the disciple whom Jesus loves.”

Rather than an imaginary figure, it may be based on a particular disciple whose name is deliberately withheld in order to permit such generalization. In any case, it tells us little about the

literary authorship of the gospel. If the analysis, or even the approach of Raymond Brown or Urban von Wahlde is correct, it would be a mistake to seek a single author of the whole gospel. Rather, the material will have been re-handled at several different stages, each contributing its own features and emphases.” (Henry Wansbrough) Again, surely one cannot reasonably eliminate John, one of the sons of Zebedee, as the primary source, both his oral and written remembrances, as the foundation for his gospel.

“One of the most interesting literary features of John’s Gospel is that the dialogues between Jesus and other characters often revolve around words and phrases that have multiple meanings. The literary pattern is frequently the same: the Johannine Jesus says something, one or more other characters misunderstand him, and Jesus slowly brings the dialogue partner(s) to a deeper understanding. Often the misunderstanding is because people interpret Jesus’ words on a plain or physical level, whereas he is really speaking on a more symbolic or spiritual level.” (ENTER, Fr.Felix Just) Jesus’ night time talk with Nicodemus regarding being “born-again” is an example. (John 3: 5)

We should add to our understanding a bit of how we got the texts of the New Testament as we know it today. For me, there is no better source to explain this than the man who edited the New Jerusalem Bible, which I have used exclusively over the years, Dom Henry Wansbrough

Transmission:

“The letters of Paul were intended to be read aloud and heard in the Christian assembly rather than read privately by individuals. The same will have been true of the gospels and all

the other Books of scripture. In the modern world for certainty we like to have something ‘on paper’ (perhaps ‘on screen’), whereas in the ancient world the oral tradition was preferred, and written records were considered less reliable. Before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, texts had to be copied by hand. In classical antiquity this was normally done by professional scribes, either one scribe copying from a previous manuscript or a group of scribes writing at dictation – a primitive method of polycopying. This was not always done with absolute accuracy, for instance in written script the Greek abbreviation for ‘God’ could easily be confused with ‘who’ (1 Tim. 3.16); at dictation the Greek for ‘ours’ and ‘yours’ was pronounced almost identically and easily confused. Misreading was made all the more likely by *scriptio continua*, that is, there were no paragraphs, no punctuation, nor even gaps between words.”

“In the Hebrew tradition the very letters of each Book of the Bible were counted in the hope of ensuring accuracy, but it was not unusual for a codicil to be added to a book, calling down a curse on anyone who copied the text inaccurately. Despite all efforts and all professionalism, several classical Greek and Roman authors joke about the possibility of miscopying of their own texts (e.g. Martial, *Epigrams* 1.115). This was obviously a frequent occurrence. The peppery St Jerome complains bitterly about mistakes made by professional scribes in copying out his own works (*Letter* 71.5). In the population at large, literacy levels were low, possibly only 10 to 15 per cent being able to read or write at all. In the second century a pagan writer called Celsus mocks the low level of education among Christians of his time.”

“A century later the Christian scholar Origen, writing against Celsus, does not attempt to refute these charges, which we may take to be well founded. Origen himself found that there were

so many variations in the text of the Greek Old Testament that he went to massive lengths in trying to re-establish the true text, setting out different versions in six parallel columns. The text ran to 6,000 pages; it was lost in the Moslem invasions of Palestine, and only fragments quoted by other writers survive. The first mention of professional scribal work on the Christian Bible is when the Emperor Constantine, after his conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century, instructed Eusebius of Caesarea to have 50 copies of the Bible made and disseminated.”

The Manuscripts:

“In the first Christian century two kinds of material were used for preserving written texts, papyrus and vellum. Papyrus (from which we get the word ‘paper’) was made from two layers of the papyrus plant, cut into strips, flattened and pressed together at right angles. Vellum or parchment (the name is derived from the town of Pergamum in Asia Minor) is made from animal skins, cleaned and dried. It is more durable but more expensive to make. The principal manuscripts of the Bible are of parchment, but in the last 150 years important caches of papyrus manuscripts have been discovered in the dry sands of Egypt, which add greatly to our knowledge.”

“Most literary works were in the form of scrolls, written on one side and rolled up. However, from the end of the first century Christians seem to have played an important part in development of the codex, or book, consisting of pages written on both sides and bound together on a spine. A codex uses less material and is easier to handle and transport, and in the long run is more durable. All the earliest Christian biblical papyri from the second century are in the form of a codex. The oldest, known as P52, is a small seven–line fragment containing John

18.31–3 on one side and 18.37–8 on the other. It is dated by the style of handwriting to 100–125AD; the date is important, showing that John’s gospel must have been written some years before that date; it is permanently on view in Manchester UK. The biblical scholarly world was briefly thrown into disarray in 1994 by the claim that the handwriting of P64, a fragment of Matthew held at Magdalen College, Oxford, was mid-first century. This would have meant that Matthew was the earliest of all New Testament writings; however it is now firmly held that this fragment and two other fragments of the same are parts of the first book containing all four gospels, probably from the late second century.”

“The three principal sources for reconstruction of the Greek text of the New Testament are the Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, all containing virtually the whole Bible.” (Henry Wansbrough)

Historical, Historic, and the Real:

In Volume One of Fr. John Meier’s book *A Marginal Jew* he laid out the basic principles guiding the quest as well as some initial observations about Jesus’ social, cultural, economic, and familial background that would provide a general historical context for the quest. Early in that book Fr. Meier addressed a subject that made a lot of sense to me regarding the “historical” Jesus, the “historic” Jesus, and the “real” Jesus. We should pick up a few pages of Fr. Meier’s text on the subject.

HISTORICAL AND HISTORIC

“Real, historical, earthly—these are the distinctions I shall use in an attempt to bring some terminological clarity into the murky debate about the historical Jesus. In doing this, I

purposely choose not to lean on the classic distinction found in many German authors, who distinguish the ‘historical’ (*historisch*) from the ‘historic’ (*geschichtlich*). The ‘historical’ refers to the dry bare bones of knowledge about the past, with the researcher prescinding from any possible relevance to or influence on our present-day life and quest for meaning. Imagine, for instance, an expert in ancient Babylonian history, driven by nothing except a thirst for exactitude, trying to draw up a precise- chronology of the reigning kings of Babylon in a given century. Such a ‘historical’ study aims at the past as dead past, viewed with the cold eye of objective research, interested in pure, verifiable data for their own sake. The ‘historic,’ in contrast, refers to the past as it is meaningful and challenging, engaging and thought-provoking for present-day men and women. Imagine, for instance, a black college student writing a thesis on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The young scholar might be quite careful in researching the facts; but the figure of King could never be for that student simply a datum embalmed in the past. Inevitably, the student would select, arrange, and underscore certain data insofar as they seemed to speak to the problems and promises of today.”

“*In principle*, this distinction of historical and historic can be applied to Jesus just as much as to any other great personage of the past. *In theory*, he can be made the object of a coolly distant scientific investigation, or he can be approached as the highly significant source and center of Christian thought and life down through the ages, a figure still worshiped by millions today.”

“Although this distinction of historical (*historisch*) and historic (*geschichtlich*) is often repeated in Jesus research (especially among those strongly influenced by the Bultmannian tradition), I remain doubtful of its usefulness for English-

speaking scholars today, for four reasons. (1) After close to a century of use, the distinction remains ambiguous and varies in meaning or function from author to author, with even some Germans not observing it. (2) The distinction, while supposedly employed to facilitate objective research, often carries with it the extra baggage of theological or ideological agendas. (3) The twofold distinction does not do justice to the complexity of the situation. (4) While defensible in theory, it is useless in the real world-even the 'real' world of scholars."

"First of all, the distinction does not always mean the same thing or function in the same way even among the various writers who use it. Martin Kähler (1835-1912), who applied the distinction to Jesus in the last century, did so in defense of a particular kind of 'critical pietism' in late 19th-century German Protestantism-and even he did not always observe his own distinction with strict rigor. His ultimate goal seems to have been the protection of basic traditional Christian teachings about Jesus Christ (e.g., true divinity and true sinless humanity) from the inroads of historical criticism;"

"This was not exactly the driving concern of Rudolf Bultmann (1884- 1976) when he took over the distinction in his 20th-century synthesis of Christianity and Martin Heidegger's brand of existentialism. Bultmann is one with Kähler in emphasizing the central Christian proclamation (*ker.ygma* = *preaching of the early church*) of Jesus' death and resurrection and in rejecting the historical Jesus as the basis or the content of Christian faith. Bultmann, however, pushes the distinction in a direction that Kähler would hardly have followed. For Bultmann, it makes no difference whether Jesus actually broke down and despaired on the cross; the mere fact that Jesus died on the cross is sufficient for Christian faith, i.e., for the encounter between the believer and God. While something can

be known of Jesus' teaching, "we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary ..." At this point, the reader may get the uneasy feeling that the historic Christ, the kerygmatic Christ, the Christ of faith exalted by Bultmann, looks suspiciously like a timeless gnostic myth or a Jungian archetype, no matter how much Bultmann stresses historicity and the identity of the crucified Jesus with the *kerygma* that is preached."

"Hence it is not surprising that some German theologians, notably Paul Althaus (1888-1966), sought to reclaim Kähler's historical/historic distinction for a more conservative school of thought; Yet, as Heraclitus observed, no one can put his foot into the same stream twice. Faced with the historical skepticism of Bultmann, and appropriating the 'new quest' of Bultmann's pupils (e.g., Gunther Bornkamm), Althaus looks to historical research for the guarantee that the Christ of faith is not just another great myth of world religions. So, while rejecting Bultmann's approach, Althaus takes a basically positive stance toward the new quest of post-Bultmannians like Bornkamm since, 'by its very nature, Christian faith has a burning interest in what scientific history can know about Jesus.' One cannot imagine Kähler saying this about the German 'liberal lives of Jesus' in the 19th century. Thus, although Althaus, in his opposition to Bultmann, seeks to remain the faithful interpreter of Kähler, the distinction between historical and historic receives a new twist."

What makes the historical/historic distinction even more problematic is that some key scholars within 20th-century German Lutheranism (and German Lutheranism was the source of the distinction) reject its validity or simply ignore it. Most curious is the treatment given the distinction by Albert

Schweitzer (1875-1965), the great chronicler and critic of the 'liberal lives.' On the one hand, Schweitzer shows no knowledge of Kähler or his work and does not utilize Kähler's distinction in his own presentation. On the other hand, while treating early 20th-century disputes over the historicity of Jesus, Schweitzer notes in passing the position of G. Wobbermin, a professor at Breslau, who "goes off on a dangerous path. Wobbermin's dangerous path is his 'attempt' to distinguish between the historical (*historisch*) and the historic (*geschichtlich*) Jesus. The distinction is understood roughly in the sense Kähler proposed, but Schweitzer will have none of it. With sarcastic indignation he points out that the historic Jesus has been responsible for untold evils down through the ages, from the destruction of ancient culture to the very fact of the Middle Ages to Catholicism's attempt to destroy 'the many progressive achievements of the modern state.' Who would want to give up the historical Jesus for this historic figure?"

"Closer to our own day, Joachim Jeremias (1900-79), one of the 20th century's greatest experts on the historical Jesus, simply refused to operate with the historical/historic distinction. Thus, we are left asking ourselves: With such a variety of uses or non uses among German scholars, is the distinction all that vital or useful among English-speaking scholars?"

"A second problem with the distinction is that, almost inevitably, it leads to a 'good guy / bad guy' presentation. Either the historical Jesus is exalted in order to dethrone a Christ of faith that was merely a fraudulent creation of the Church (so many from Reimarus to Hollenbach), or the historic Christ is extolled over the oscillating and contradictory reconstructions of the historical Jesus (so Kähler and followers, including many 'dialectical' theologians like

Barth and Bultmann after World War I). Granted, the distinction need not be accompanied by value judgments and theological programs, but such has been the case for about a century. All that seems to happen is that new agendas (e.g., liberation theology) replace the old ones; the game of good guy/bad guy continues.”

“A third problem is that the dichotomy of historical/historic, while applicable to most well-known figures of the past, does not do justice to the complexity of the case of Jesus. Norman Perrin pointed out that a three-part distinction fits the special situation of Jesus better. (1) One can collect descriptive historical knowledge (‘hard’ knowledge) about a person of the ancient past called Jesus of Nazareth; this is the level of the ‘historical.’ One can then proceed to highlight and appropriate those aspects of this historical knowledge that would be significant for us today. This is the level of the ‘historic.’ However, one could do the same thing in the case of Socrates, St. Augustine, or Sigmund Freud. Any great thinker and actor of the past can be studied on the level of cold disconnected facts and bare chronology or on the level of a meaningful synthesis of his or her thought and action, seen as relevant and challenging for people today. In that sense, one could be committed to the ‘program’ of Socrates or Freud, one could be entranced and gripped by the person of Thomas More or Thomas Jefferson; in the same way one can be personally fascinated by the historic Jesus, whether one is a Jew, a Buddhist, or an agnostic. Hence the second level must be carefully distinguished from a *third level*, namely faith-knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Christ, the faith-stance that prompts *me* to call Jesus my Lord and Savior.” (Fr. John Meier)

The question must be asked, if we step into Fr. Meier’s “third level,” are we stepping out of history in the sense of the *historical* or the *historic*? If the truth be known, it is not we who do the stepping. Fr. Meier got it right when he said his faith-stance depended on a *prompt* as the incentive for his action— not only to believe what the *real* Jesus had said and done, but to devote his whole life to his service; proved by his ordination to the Catholic priesthood.

Fascination with the man Jesus by a Buddhist, Jew or an agnostic, from a historical perspective, is completely understandable. What prompts them is the question of what makes 2.2 billion people, or 31 percent of the world’s total population believe him to be the Son of God or God himself. Now, of course, how many honestly believe this can never really be known. There are very few people who say Jesus never existed, most know, or will say that they know he was a real human being like themselves.

With regard to GOD, according to a survey by World Religions Religion Statistics Geography Church Statistics, people who are “secular, non-religious (nones), agnostics and atheists” account for about 14% of the world’s population. Therefore, the actual numerical figure of people who believe in God is approximately six billion-twenty million, out of about 7.6 billion total. Presumably these are the people who say God is *real*, but not exactly like themselves. They sense him but have never seen him. For Christians it was John the Baptizer who told us: “*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.*”

The Old Testament tells us that Moses had a close encounter with him on several occasions, in the “burning bush,” and

eventually he saw only his “back,” but how are we to believe John and Moses? Well, it’s revealed in the Bible of course! The bible whose veracity we’ve been questioning since the Middle Ages. Yet it’s not only the bible but also by human-tradition that we are prompted to trust and therefore believe. If John the Baptizer is correct, the only one who has ever known and seen God is Jesus of Nazareth, who is reported to have said:

“If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, ‘He is our God,’ though you do not know him. But I know him; if I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.’ Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’” (John 8: 55)

In the real world, the “traditional” world, the bible is not an “historical” book, it is an “historic” book using Fr. Meier’s definitions. It is not frozen in the sixth century BCE or the first century CE. It is an accumulation of oral and written human opinions, suppositions, assumptions, determinations, conclusions, understandings and beliefs— respecting natural and unnatural (unusual) events over time, all the way from when Abraham left Ur to a child being baptized today. It went through a transition from oral to literary works written by inspired, but imperfect men. In the above quote one can see that the Jews of Jesus’ day thought their father Abraham was anachronistic, someone of the ancient past whose relevancy was meaningless in their day. Whereas the faith of the worlds three great religions is based on an act of his obedience to the One Almighty God he knew of when there was no bible. The

first man Adam was not imagined to reason and will. He and she, Eve, got to know God, by the will of God through evolution. In denying Adam, one denies oneself.

Before we return to what Professor Ehrdman thinks about who Jesus reality is, we should pick up a few pieces from Benedict XVI's homilies in his little book on the Apostles Creed titled *The Faith*:

Chapter Five, *His Only Son*:

“The people thought that Jesus was a prophet. This was not wrong, but it does not suffice; it is inadequate. In fact, it was a matter of delving deep, of recognizing the uniqueness of the person of Jesus of Nazareth and His newness. This is how it still is today: Many people draw near to Jesus, as it were, from the outside. Great scholars recognize His spiritual and moral stature and His influence on human history, comparing him to Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and other wise and important historical figures. Yet they do not manage to recognize Him in His uniqueness...Jesus is often also considered as one of the great founders of a religion from which everyone may take something in order to form his or her own conviction. Today too, people have different opinions about Jesus, just as they did then. And as He did then, Jesus also repeats His question to us, His disciples of today: “And who do *you* say that I am?” (Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20; Mt 16:15).

Chapter Sixteen, *The Holy Catholic Church: Sacred Scripture and the Church*

“In the Church, Sacred Scripture, the understanding of which increases under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of its authentic interpretation that was conferred upon

the Apostles, are indissolubly bound. Whenever Sacred Scripture is separated from the living voice of the Church, it falls prey to disputes among experts. Of course, all they have to tell us is important and invaluable. The work of scholars is a considerable help in understanding the living process in which the Scriptures developed, hence, also in grasping their historical (maybe “historic” would have been better) richness. Yet science alone cannot provide us with a definitive and binding interpretation. It is unable to offer us, in its interpretation, that certainty with which we can live and for which we can even die. A greater mandate is necessary for this, which cannot derive from human abilities alone. The voice of the living Church is essential for this, of the Church entrusted until the end of time to Peter and to the College of the Apostles.

This power of teaching frightens many people in and outside the Church. They wonder whether freedom of conscience is threatened or whether it is a presumption opposed to freedom of thought. It is not like this.

The power that Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors is, in an absolute sense, *a mandate to serve*. The power of teaching in the Church involves a commitment to the service of obedience to the faith. The Pope is not an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law. On the contrary: The Pope’s ministry is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and to his Word. He must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the Church to obedience to God’s Word, in the face of every attempt to adapt it or water it down, and every form of opportunism....

The Pope knows that in his important decisions, he is bound to the great community of faith of all times, to the binding

interpretations that have developed throughout the Church's pilgrimage. Thus, his power is not being above, but [rather] at the service of, the Word of God. It is incumbent upon him to ensure that this Word continues to be present in its greatness and to resound in its purity, so that it is not torn to pieces by continuous changes in usage.

The Chair of Peter is — let us say it again — a symbol of the power of teaching, which is a power of obedience and service, so that the Word of God — the truth! — may shine out among us and show us the way of life. (Benedict XVI, from *The Faith*)

We will begin to conclude this rather long critique of Professor Ehrdmans book *How Jesus Became God* by clipping the early part his Epilogue and his Conclusion which I like to think is his “apologia,” i.e. his defense of what he honestly believes about the Christ of the New Testament, the Jesus of Nazareth to whom “Doubting” Thomas the Apostle said: “*My Lord and my God!*” To whom Peter the Apostle responded: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*” according to scripture.

I have numbered his paragraphs so that we can comment on his summation and conclusions simply as a believer, with the full realization that I do not have the least credentials to do so. I still confess an annoyance with his title. It alludes to a universal understanding that through all the Church's successes and failures; all the persecutions; the martyrs, the great saints and sages; all the great councils and 2.2 billion Christians today— we have a man-made GOD not much different from the ones we had in Egypt, Greece and Rome. Instead, by grace and faith, we have God made man.

How Jesus Became God

1. AS I HAVE BEEN writing this book I have come to realize that the history of my own personal theology is a mirror image of the history of the theology of the early church. To use the older terminology, in early Christianity the views of Christ got “higher and higher” with the passing of time, as he became increasingly identified as divine. Jesus went from being a potential (human) messiah to being the Son of God exalted to a divine status at his resurrection; to being a preexistent angelic being who came to earth incarnate as a man; to being the incarnation of the Word of God who existed before all time and through whom the world was created; to being God himself, equal with God the Father and always existent with him. My own personal beliefs about Jesus moved in precisely the opposite direction. I started out thinking of Jesus as God the Son, equal with the Father, a member of the Trinity; but over time, I began to see him in “lower and lower” terms, until finally I came to think of him as a human being who was not different in nature from any other human being. The Christians exalted him to the divine realm in their theology, but in my opinion, he was, and always had been, a human.

2. As an agnostic, I now think of Jesus as a true religious genius with brilliant insights. But he was also very much a man of his time. And his time was an age of full-throated apocalyptic fervor. Jesus participated in this first-century Palestinian Jewish milieu. He was born and raised in it, and it was the context within which he conducted his public ministry. Jesus taught that the age he lived in was controlled by forces of evil but that God would soon intervene to destroy everything and everyone opposed to him. God would then bring in a good, utopian kingdom on earth, where there would be no more pain and suffering. Jesus himself would be the

ruler of this kingdom, with his twelve disciples serving under him. And all this was to happen very soon—within his own generation.

3. This apocalyptic message does continue to resonate with me, but I certainly do not believe it literally. I do not think that there are supernatural powers of evil who are controlling our governments or demons who are making our lives miserable; I do not think there is going to be a divine intervention in the world in which all the forces of evil will be permanently destroyed; I do not think there will be a future utopian kingdom here on earth ruled by Jesus and his apostles. But I do think there is good and evil; I do think we should all be on the side of good; and I do think we should fight mightily against all that is evil.

4. I especially resonate with the ethical teachings of Jesus. He taught that much of the law of God could be summarized in the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” He taught that you should “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” He taught that our acts of love, generosity, mercy, and kindness should reach even to “the least of these, my brothers and sisters”—that is, to the lowly, the outcast, the impoverished, the homeless, the destitute. I agree wholeheartedly with these views and try my best to live according to them.

5. But as a historian I realize that Jesus’s ethical teachings were delivered in a decidedly apocalyptic form to which I do not subscribe. Jesus is sometimes lauded as one of the great moral teachers of all time, and I sympathize with this characterization. But it is important to realize that the reasoning behind his moral teaching is not the reasoning most of us use today. People today think that we should live

ethically for a wide variety of reasons—most of them irrelevant to Jesus—for example, so we can find the greatest self-fulfillment in life and so we can all thrive together as a society for the long haul. Jesus did not teach his ethics so that society could thrive for the long haul. For Jesus, there was not going to be a long haul. The end was coming soon, and people needed to prepare for it. Those who lived according to the standards he set forth, loving God with all their being and loving one another as themselves, would enter into the kingdom of God that was very soon to appear. Anyone who chose not to do so would be destroyed when the Son of Man arrived in judgment from heaven. Jesus’s ethics were an “ethics of the kingdom” both because the kinds of lives his followers led when they followed these ethical principles would be the kinds of lives they would experience in the kingdom—where there would be no war, hatred, violence, oppression, or injustice—and because a person could enter into the kingdom only by living in this way.

6. This is not the worldview I myself have. I don’t believe there is a God in heaven who is soon to send a cosmic judge of the earth to destroy the forces of evil. And yet I think that the ethical principles Jesus enunciated in that apocalyptic context are still applicable to me, living in a different context. To make sense of Jesus, I have re-contextualized him—that is, made him and his message relevant in a new context—for a new day, the day in which I live.

7. I would argue that Jesus has always been re-contextualized by people living in different times and places. The first followers of Jesus did this after they came to believe that he had been raised from the dead and exalted to heaven: they made him into something he had not been before and understood him in light of their new situation. So too did the

later authors of the New Testament, who re-contextualized and understood Jesus in light of their own, now even more different situations. So too did the Christians of the second and third centuries, who understood Jesus less as an apocalyptic prophet and more as a divine being become human. So too did the Christians of the fourth century, who maintained that he had always existed and had always been equal with God the Father in status, authority, and power. And so too do Christians today, who think that the divine Christ they believe in and confess is identical in every respect with the person who was walking the dusty lanes of Galilee preaching his apocalyptic message of the coming destruction. Most Christians today do not realize that they have re-contextualized Jesus. But in fact they have. Everyone who either believes in him or subscribes to any of his teachings has done so—from the earliest believers who first came to believe in his resurrection until today. And so it will be, world without end.

8. This is certainly and most obviously true of the years we have examined in this book. It continued to be true in the years that followed, as we can now see as we consider what happened in the aftermath of the decision of the Council of Nicea that Christ was God in a particular sense, that he had been a preexistent divine being with God throughout all eternity, and that he was, in fact, the one through whom God had made all things.

Professor Ehrdman's CONCLUSION

9. In none of the Christian controversies I have discussed in this epilogue was there any question of whether Jesus was God. Jesus was in fact God. All of the participants in these debates had a "Nicene" understanding of Christ: he was God from back into eternity; there never was a time when or before

which he did not exist; he was the one through whom God had created all things in heaven and on earth; he was of the same substance as God the Father; he was in fact equal with God in status, authority, and power. These are all quite exalted things to say about an apocalyptic preacher from rural Galilee who was crucified for crimes against the state. We have come a long way over the three hundred years since Jesus's death. But one could argue—and probably should argue—that in fact Christian thinking about Jesus had come an enormous way just twenty years after his death. It must have been no more than twenty years after Jesus died, possibly even fewer, that the Christ poem in Philippians was composed, in which Jesus was said to have been a preexistent being “in the form of God” who became human and then because of his obedient death was exalted to divine status and made equal with God, the Lord to whom all people on earth would bow in worship and confess loyalty. One German scholar of the New Testament, Martin Hengel, has famously claimed that “with regard to the development of all the early Church's Christology . . . more happened in the first twenty years than in the entire later, centuries-long development of dogma.”

10. There is a certain truth to this claim. Of course, a lot did indeed happen after the first twenty years—an enormous amount. But the major leap was made in those twenty years: from seeing Jesus as his own disciples did during his ministry, as a Jewish man with an apocalyptic message of coming destruction, to seeing him as something far greater, a preexistent divine being who became human only temporarily before being made the Lord of the universe. It was not long after that that Jesus was declared to be the very Word of God made flesh, who was with God at creation and through whom God made all things. Eventually Jesus came to be seen as God in every respect, coeternal with the Father, of the same

substance as the Father, equal to the Father within the Trinity of three persons, but one God.

11. This God-Christ may not have been the historical Jesus. But he was the Christ of orthodox Christian doctrine, the object of faith and veneration over the centuries. And he is still the God revered and worshiped by Christians throughout our world today.

Responses: Epilogue:

1. Dr. Ehrdman believes that *we*, Jesus' followers of yesterday and today, beginning with John the Baptizer, have made him into someone he should never have been. From the wrongful, ignominious death of a blasphemous traitor, we have created, along with his so called Father and Spirit, the Trinitarian GOD of all creation. As a wise and ethical 30 year old man, we should have just followed his reiteration of the golden-rule (Matt 7:12) from the Shema of the Jews, (Deut, 6:4) As Bart Ehrdman began losing his faith, he, at last, caught up with the Enlightenment seeing Jesus in "lower and lower terms," as simply human; man, after all, is the "measure of all things." It was we who exalted Jesus and moved him into the divine realm" we and our theology, we unenlightened Christians.

Why would we have done this to a particular, brilliant itinerant preacher from "the backwater of Galilee"? Surely others besides him have shown signs of "spectacular" works of divine "magic". There was Apollonius of Tyana, Alexander of Abonutichus and others. This young man Jesus, though, was a Jew. Unlike the others, he had one God— the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Was it our theology that made him their Messiah, or did the Prophets of Israel forecast his humble entrance into time? Deliverance from constant oppression

from the likes of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians and finally the Romans was prophesied long before the unusual birth of the Christ. “*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him...*” (John 1:11, NRSV) said John; understood by most scholars to be the Apostle whom Jesus loved—and the Evangelist. For First Century Jews the Messiah wasn’t supposed to come to his people under such humble and dubious circumstances. Born of a virgin? Who could believe that! Certainly the messiah was not expected to be put to death on the cross by the state on behalf of the people to whom he brought the “Kingdom of God.” “Prophets do not come out of Galilee!” (John 7:52) What is this Kingdom he preached about?

“The underlying Hebrew word *malkut* “is a *nomen actionis* [an action word] and means— as does the Greek word *basileia* [kingdom]— the regal function, the active lordship of the king” What is meant is not an imminent or yet to be established “kingdom,” but God’s actual sovereignty over the world, which is becoming an event in history in a new way. We can put it even more simply: When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is quite simply proclaiming God, and proclaiming him to be the living God, who is able to act concretely in the world and in history and even *now* is so acting. He is telling us: “God exists” and “God is really God,” [the God humans have vaguely comprehended since the brain to mind transition] which means that [we believe] he holds in his hands the threads of the world. In this sense, Jesus’ message is very simple and thoroughly God-centered. The new and totally specific thing about his message is that he is telling us: God is acting now— this is the hour when God is showing himself in history as its Lord, as the *living* God, in a way that goes beyond anything seen before. “Kingdom of

God” is therefore an inadequate translation. It would be better to speak of God’s being-Lord, of his lordship...”

“...The announcement of God’s lordship is, like Jesus’ entire message, founded on the Old Testament. Jesus reads the Old Testament, in its progressive movement from the beginnings with Abraham right down to his own time, as a single whole; precisely when we grasp this movement as a whole, we see that it leads directly to Jesus himself.” (Benedict XVI: *Jesus of Nazareth*)

2. We wonder whether Dr. Ehrdman is a true “agnostic?” An agnostic is one who claims *not* to have true knowledge about the existence of God but does not deny that God might exist. It’s obvious in the case of agnostics, they have not accepted Jesus as Son of God, or God—the second person of the Blessed Trinity, as faithful Christians have done. They have rejected God as “man” in Christ. That’s understandable since his unenlightened followers invented that concept, but what of God the Creator? The Professor says: “I don’t believe there is a God in heaven who is soon to send a cosmic judge of the earth to destroy the forces of evil.” I think Dr. Ehrdman may be referencing a verse from (John 5:22) coupled with (Matthew 25: 31 not copied) which says:

“The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.”(John 5:22)

I would argue that if God does exist for the Professor, he would be in the form of Deism which Bishop Barron describes as “a distant clockmaker isolated in an indifferent transcendence. In time, even this marginalized divinity came to be seen as a threat to human liberty, and the peculiarly modern form of atheism emerged as a result.” Let us hope and pray that Bart Ehrdman’s agnosticism does not turn out to be veiled atheism.

3. Anyone who knows even a little bit about cosmology knows the world will eventually end. Roughly 6 billion years from now, the Earth will probably be vaporized when the dying Sun expands into a red giant and engulfs our planet. Is that the apocalypse spoken of in the bible or will God bring it to an end with a “general judgement” before it’s “natural” scientific end? No one knows.

“Jewish eschatology is the area of theology and philosophy concerned with events that will happen in the end of days and related concepts, according to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish thought. This includes the ingathering of the exiled diaspora, the coming of a Jewish Messiah, afterlife, and the revival of the dead Tzadikim. In Judaism, end times are usually called the "end of days" (אָהַרֵי־הַיָּמִים, aḥarit ha-yamim), a phrase that appears several times in the Tanakh.

Until the late modern era, the standard Jewish belief was that after one dies, one's immortal soul joins God in the world to come while one's body decomposes. At the end of days, God will recompose one's body, place within it one's immortal soul, and that person will stand before God in judgement. The idea of a messianic age has a prominent place in Jewish thought, and is incorporated as part of the end of days. Jewish philosophers from medieval times to the present day have

emphasized the soul's immortality and deemphasized the resurrection of the dead.”(Wikipedia) Most of Jewish Eschatology is incorporated into Christian theology.

God only knows about the “end-times,” but historically, it was surely apocryphal for blood sacrifices and the Jerusalem Temple when in 70 CE the Romans destroyed it and thought they had destroyed Judaism forever. The New Covenant had arrived, the Kingdom of God was abroad and *in* all of us. The earliest Christians were the Jews of the diaspora with the Gentiles soon to follow. Around the same time, the words of Christ began to be put together by his followers, surrogates of the Apostles and the “Early-Fathers,” constructing the bible from the traditional oral and written transmissions about his life death and resurrection.

Matthew 24: 36 says: *“But about that day and hour [of the apocalypse] no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

“Notwithstanding Christ's express refusal to specify the time of the end (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:6 sq.), it was a common belief among early Christians that the end of the world was near. [They were Jewish Christians] This seemed to have some support in certain sayings of Christ in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, which are set down in the Gospels side by side with prophecies relating to the end (Matthew 24; Luke 21), and in certain passages of the Apostolic writings, which might, not unnaturally, have been so understood (but see 2 Thessalonians 2:2 sq., where St. Paul corrects this impression). On the other hand, Christ had clearly stated that the Gospel was to be preached to all nations before the end (Matthew 24:14), and St. Paul looked forward to the ultimate conversion of the Jewish people as a remote event to be

preceded by the conversion of the Gentiles (Romans 11:25 sqq.). Various others are spoken of as preceding or ushering in the end, as a great apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:3 sqq.), or falling away from faith or charity (Luke 18:8; 17:26; Matthew 24:12), the reign of Antichrist, and great social calamities and terrifying physical convulsions. Yet the end will come unexpectedly and take the living by surprise. (Catholic Encyclopedia: 1903)

It is very difficult to comment on the “apocalypse.” Even Jesus is reported to have said he didn’t know the time nor the place. We are on common ground with Dr Ehrdman’s simple statement: “I do think we should all be on the side of good; and I do think we should fight mightily against all that is evil.” We are living our lives with God, the Almighty Father, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, wholly in the Spirit; or we have chosen to live as existentialists; without the expectation and hope Jesus brought us in the name of the Father; living a self-centered life where the dictatorship of relativism reigns. “Science is limited to the scientific-method of observation, research, hypothesis, prediction, experimentation and conclusion. Though the scientific-method is effective in tackling purely physical questions, its deficiency is based on the idea that understanding can only come through physical observation. It rejects the idea of revealed knowledge from a source outside the physical realm.” (Life, Hope and Truth blog) That throws metaphysics under the bus. One wonders how Plato, Aristotle, et al, ever became the bellwether of western thought. Observation also has its many problems with Quantum Mechanics.

4. Q. What is ethics? A. *Motivation based on ideas of right and wrong: The philosophical study of moral values and rules.* (word web) It seems that to know “ethics” one needs to study the difference between right and wrong. Many will take

religion out of the matrix of explaining the difference and will hold that the difference between right and wrong is strictly cultural. To put it in the words of Oscar Hammerstein, “You’ve got to be taught to hate.” Little thought seems to be given to the fact that the main support of culture *is* religion. It appears that Professor Ehrdman agrees that Jesus was a great ethical, religious teacher as were others. His problem is the fact that Jesus, the Christ of Christianity is not unique among men. In founding his church he was not capable as a man to award his followers the Holy Spirit in a special way so as to inform the world of the truth in the scripture. Catholic Christians believe, in union with the holy sacrifice of the mass, that Christ in the Eucharist is literally with us at the invocation of a duly ordained priest, fitting with the words of Jesus in the texts. “*Do this in memory of me*” (Luke 22:19) Since the middle of the first century christians have been partaking of the Lord their God, usually on Sunday, the day on which he rose.

5. I believe that Benedict answered paragraph #5 1000 times better than I could on p.54 and 55 above.

6. In Fr. Meier’s understanding of the difference between the *historical* Jesus and the *historic* Jesus, is the Jesus christians know is not frozen in the apocalyptic first century, but is Jesus, the author of history. As the Son of God and the Son of Man he is at once the Word of the God and the Brother of humankind. The *historic* Jesus, i.e., the *real* Jesus, is the contextual Jesus of *all* times. Why would scholars be trying to decipher what his true meaning historically *was* and not reconcile with what his true historic meaning *is* within the context of twenty centuries of evolutionary exegesis? “Re-contextualizing” means simply suiting Jesus to fit oneself. What Dr. Ehrdman has accused churchmen of doing he has

done himself by reducing Jesus to just a man, even a great man. Christians, by recognizing his contextual divinity on the faith of his church, guided by the Holy Spirit, is the “*Jesus Christ of today and yesterday and forever.*” (Hebrews 13: 8)

7. Response is in 6 above.

8. Response is in 6 above

Responses: Conclusion:

9. One can surely agree with the way Professor Ehrdman factiously put what Christians believe in his conclusion. When a final compilation of the books of the New Testament were being assembled, the early fathers were fighting gross misunderstandings of the texts, the so called heresies of various speculations such as Gnosticism: 1st century, Montanism: Late second century, Arianism: 4th century, Pelagianism: 5th century, etc. For the “Orthodox, the recognition of these writings as authoritative was formalized in the Second Council of Trullan of 692. The Catholic Church made dogmatic definition upon its Biblical canon in 382 at the Council of Rome as well as at the Council of Trent of 1546, reaffirming the Canons of Florence of 1442 and North African Councils (Hippo and Carthage) of 393–419.”

We would agree with Martin Hengel. “With regard to the development of all the early Church’s Christology . . . more happened in the first twenty years than in the entire later, centuries-long development of dogma.”

10. & 11. We believe that Jesus’ disciples and the apostles confessed Jesus’ divinity. Even a cursory reading of Acts leads us to that confirmation. We strongly agree with Ehrdman’s conclusion that Jesus was the man who died on the cross. But

by the grace of God and in faith we believe The Son of God rose from the dead and walked with us for forty days in a glorified state, communed with the apostles then ascended to heaven, and “*will come again to judge the living and the dead.*” (Apostles Creed)

Gospel Acclamation:

Glory and praise to you, O Christ.

They are happy who dwell in your house, O Lord,
for ever singing your praise.

Glory and praise to you, O Christ.

Amen