

Paul George, *Jesus of the Books: A Pragmatic History of the Early Church* (Vivid Publishing, 2018. www.vividpublishing.com.au. Reviewed by Robert M. Price.

Paul George (please, no “John Ringo” jokes!) makes a case for Christianity having begun, not with an historical Jesus, but as a collective reaction to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Does he succeed in “proving” his case? Probably not, but by now surely we all know that is not quite the point of such an exercise. Rather, one might better say he is showing what sense it would make if one took a second look at the data (both familiar and neglected) through this paradigm. Given the inevitably tentative, provisional quality of historical judgments, we can seldom expect more. Those are just the rules of the game.

George understands the creation of the pseudo-historical Jesus and the rise of Christianity among Jews (the Ebionite variety being the original version) as a result of cultural trauma, what with the Jerusalem Temple’s destruction making traditional means of atonement impossible plus the bankruptcy of fervent hopes for messianic deliverance crushed by the Romans. There was certainly theological movement in this direction among Jews who never went as far as starting a whole new religious mutation. The rabbis taught that non-ceremonial means of atonement included illness and good works, a rationalizing (in the good sense) maneuver. They also put messianism on the back burner, retaining the belief in Messiah’s eventual advent while discouraging messianic date-setting and activism. On the other hand, George details the wide areas of continuity between Ebionite Christianity and already-established Essenism, minimizing the radical novelty of the former. The beginning of Christianity was, so to speak, a major mutation but not a “hopeful monster” like a mammal hatching out of a dinosaur egg.

The key factor was *cognitive dissonance reduction*, a refusal to abandon belief that the Messiah must appear in the hour of greatest need. He

must have appeared, so he *did*, only no one realized it at the time. This was because he had defied expectations. The deliverance he accomplished, and that secretly, was of a spiritual nature, though soon he would return and start kicking ass. Then there would be no mistaking him. If this seems implausible, it shouldn't; just think how Millerites, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seeker sect (documented by Leon Festinger in *When Prophecy Failed*), and other disappointed apocalyptic groups made essentially the same move: "Oh yes! It *did* happen, just invisibly, unseen except by the eye of faith!" I'd say the Principle of Analogy backs him up.

George posits that the Messianic Secret theme was a way of "explaining" why no one at the time recognized the Messiah's appearing. Oh, it was definitely happening all right, but those few in a position to observe it were warned to keep mum about it. This is but a slight, and very natural, readjustment of Wrede's Messianic Secret argument, a cogent reapplication of it. So how did the earliest Christians (what form critics call the "creative community") come to "re"ognize the recent, secret appearance of the Messiah? By esoteric interpretation of Old Testament scripture, just as Earl Doherty and many others including myself have maintained. When the first Christians said Jesus did this or that "according to the scriptures," they didn't mean they were able to match up remembered events in the life of Jesus with ancient prophecies of them. No, they meant that it was Old Testament scripture that first told them these "events" took place, just as *we* learn what Jesus ostensibly said and did from reading New Testament scripture. Accordingly, the gospels are collections of rewritten Old Testament material as esoterically reinterpreted and retold. Works for me!

Our author surveys various ailments from which the Jesus character heals people. He argues that they fit better with the conditions stemming from the disasters of the Roman siege than with those of the relatively peaceful period in which the gospels place them. I have to admit I find this argument pretty tenuous, but it is quite ingenious nonetheless. Of course, he

means to say the gospel writers envision Jesus dealing with the sufferings of their own day.

One of the most controversial aspects of Christ Mythicism is that the crucifixion of Jesus was originally conceived as a celestial event, not an historical one. Jesus was executed on the “cross” of the ecliptic and the equinox, done in by fiendish Archons, Principalities and Powers (1 Cor. 2:8; Col. 2:14-15). The saving death was eventually historicized. Personally, I hold to this theory. It puzzles me that some ridicule this notion as an “outer space crucifixion” when the mytheme is well known from ancient Gnosticism, where it was believed that the Primal Man of Light was dismembered by the Archons in the heavenly realm (“outer space” if you want to call it that). Mythicists are not nuts who think this actually happened. You could jeer at that, but the real point is that these *ancient* nuts believed it—and a good number of other nutty things.

At any rate, Paul George takes the thing to a whole new level. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 Paul shares his mini-account of the establishing of the Lord’s Supper: “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was delivered up [presumably by God, cf., Romans 8:32], took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” George (quite correctly, I judge) understands “I received from the Lord” in precisely the same sense as in Galatians 1:11-12, where Paul insists that there was no intermediary between him and Christ when he received the content of his preaching. In other words, Paul’s “information” about the origin of the Eucharist came to him by revelation, not by tradition, not by communication from apostolic predecessors. That’s not news.

But George keeps going: the revelation Paul speaks of was a vision of the heavenly council, a la Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Psalm 89:7). It depicted a supper of the immortals, hosted by the celestial Christ, passing the dedicated chalice among his fellow sons of God (Psalm 29:1; Deut. 32:8). To go a step farther out on this limb, what if the

words of Jesus in Gethsemane (“Let this cup pass from me!”) were originally set in this context? This, as J. Duncan M. Derrett pointed out, was a standard bit of banquet-table rhetoric, a pro forma demurrer by the one being lionized: “Aw shucks! Surely someone else here is more deserving than me!”

The problem I see with these speculations arises when Jesus caps off the Words of Institution with the command, “Do this in remembrance of me.” On George’s reading, mustn’t this imply that the heavenly Jesus was initiating an ongoing ritual to be observed in heaven by heavenly beings? Granted, the Book of Revelation and the Dead Sea Scrolls depict the angels in heaven engaging in liturgy and ritual, but it still seems dubious to me. Nonetheless, George’s thinking suggests to me an alternative theory. What if the Emmaus story in Luke 24 was originally an etiology for the Lord’s Supper? Even as we now read it, it pretty much looks like one: Jesus reveals his presence, henceforth to be invisible, in the breaking of bread. Perhaps the Emmaus story originally contained the Words of Institution. But the “This is my body; this is my blood,” etc., was snipped out and placed back into the Passion Narrative.

Why would anyone have done this? We know. James M. Robinson demonstrated how Easter became a sliding line that could be moved in order to move this or that Jesus-teaching from the category of post-Easter revelations to that of pre-Easter teachings. For instance, John chapters 13-17, must have begun as Gnostic-style Resurrection Dialogues or Revelation Discourses like the *Pistis Sophia* and *The Dialogue of the Savior*, but as we now read them, they have become part of the Last Supper before the crucifixion. The reason for such transfers is to gain greater credibility for the teachings in question by “securing” them as sayings of an “historical,” pre-Easter Jesus. What’s the difference? If you liked the “revealed” material, there was no difference between pre-Easter and post-Easter material. But if some had their doubts, they might be won over if you could get them to believe Jesus had said it while he was still a man among men, before the

Cross, before he dissipated into the Risen Lord from whom any kook might claim to have received some eccentric message. A historical Jesus seemed to provide a more objective source/standard of reliable teaching. This was precisely Peter's rejoinder to Simon Magus in the Pseudo-Clementines: "Hey, big boy! You can say Christ told you whatever you want in some vision, but I was with him and got it right from the horse's mouth!" (My paraphrase, obviously.) Indeed, this was the whole reason for historicizing Jesus in the first place, right? To claim copyright.

The Emmaus story is that of a *vision*, right? The two disciples see the Risen Christ who institutes the Communion Meal just before he vanishes right before their eyes, signaling that he will henceforth be present invisibly among them at the breaking of the bread. But was it *Paul's* vision (referred to in 1 Corinthians 11:23-24)? Maybe so. Remember, only one of the two disciples is named: Cleopas. Why is the other left anonymous? Perhaps his name was Saul or Paul, and it has been suppressed out of burgeoning anti-Pauline factional strife by the time we read it. And then the Words of Institution were clipped and placed back on the other side of that line, during the Passion Narrative. Look, we know there must have been competing etiologies for the Lord's Supper. The one in the *Didache* looks nothing like any in the New Testament, and various early Christian groups used bread and water or bread and salt in their communion meals. So someone who preferred Paul's version tried to pull rank by retrojecting it back before Easter.

Paul George's treatment of Paul is highly unusual. He draws attention to a neglected statement of Jerome: "Paul, formerly called Saul, an apostle outside the number of twelve apostles, was of the tribe of Benjamin and the town of Giscalis in Judea. When this was taken by the Romans he removed with his parents to Tarsus in Cilicia" (*De Viris Illustribus*, 5). Let me get this straight: Paul was still alive, even a youngster, during the Jewish War with Rome? George places Paul's Christian conversion at 71 C.E. and estimates Paul's epistles (most of which he regards as authentic) as having

been finished by 87 C.E. But surely Jerome was referring to Giscalis (Gischala), along with the rest of Judea, coming under Roman rule following the death of Herod the Great, not the decades-later capture of the town during the Jewish War. This has to be Jerome's meaning since he goes on to say that, after Paul's family resettled in Tarsus, his parents packed him off to Jerusalem to study with Rabbi Gamaliel. He sure wasn't doing that during the Roman siege!

Alas, I consider most of our author's speculative history of early Christianity to be a chain of weak links, too dependent on a combination of credulous citations from church fathers about gospel authorship and highly dubious modern theories on the same. For instance, George seems simply to declare by fiat that J.E. Powell's *The Evolution of the Gospel* definitively settles the matter: Matthew was the first gospel, as Augustine held, and Mark and Luke are based on it. I'm going to need some argumentation for that. I often get the impression that, despite the author's wide reading in important adjacent fields, his acquaintance with New Testament criticism is superficial and inadequate.

The final section of the book deals with patristic anomalies such as Irenaeus' claim that Jesus lived to the age of fifty, expiring in the reign of Claudius, and the 120 year life-span of James' successor as bishop of Jerusalem, Simeon bar Cleophas. Could both of these oddities denote attempts to span the fictional lifetime of Jesus and the actual time Christianity first appeared, ca. 70 C.E.? And what about the claims of early apologists that individuals resurrected by Jesus lingered well into the second century? The retrojection of Jesus into the early 30s might account for the implied lifespans reminiscent of the pre-Flood Patriarchs. There are other arguments in the same vein, but the rest strike me as filler.

Finally, I can't resist noting a parallel between Paul George's historical reconstruction and the theory of Preterism. Both refocus gospel events on the Fall of Jerusalem. According the former, the fictional first coming of Jesus, the first appearance of the character, occurred around 70

C.E, while according to the latter, the invisible second coming actually did transpire with the Fall of Jerusalem. The former theory makes Jesus more recent, while the latter pushes the expected Parousia two millennia into the past.

But the most important aspect of the parallel is that today's Christian Preterists provide a valuable, even perfect, historical analogy to the cognitive dissonance reduction maneuver that Paul George posits for the first century C.E. The Jews/Christians just after the destruction of the Temple believed that King Messiah *must* have appeared for the deliverance of the faithful, so they decided he *had* come, albeit without anyone being aware of it at the time. In exactly the same way, modern Preterists are (rightly) sure that the New Testament writers predicted the second coming of Messiah Jesus by 70 C.E., but it didn't happen, so they infer that it *did*, though, again, it was not recognized at the time. We can reasonably suggest that George Paul's scenario is accurate; we *know* that today's Preterists have done the same thing. And that makes it all the more likely that George Paul's surmise is correct.