

A Chaotic Jesus: A Response to Simon Joseph

Abstract

This article is a response to the points raised by Simon Joseph's review of *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Keywords: Historical Jesus; Synoptic Problem; historical change; Simon Joseph; violence; nonviolence; eschatology

In *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, I wanted to develop ideas about approaching the earliest Gospel traditions in a post-criteria world. This involved critiquing the notion of Jesus the Great Man who effectively changed history singlehandedly, a view still implicit in the field, and focus rather on the ways in which ideas (including individual contributions) develop in connection with shifting socio-economic circumstances. I also wanted to look at how a Galilean movement laid the foundations for a different sort of imperial rule as a critique of the ways anti-imperialism is often understood. In more conventional historical Jesus terms, I looked at three particular case studies: the kingdom of God and 'Christology'; 'sinners' and purity; and gender. Some of this was summarised by Simon Joseph with a remarkable degree of accuracy. In this article I want to respond to Joseph's critical comments which I found to be helpful in and of themselves as well as being a useful platform upon which to develop future ideas. I will turn to the main points of contention, though I think there is a fair amount of agreement between us.

The Synoptic Problem

Joseph brought up a topic that is always tempting to avoid in historical Jesus studies and often has to be discussed in inadequate detail: Q and the Synoptic Problem. For reasons of space, such inadequacies cannot be corrected here, and I share many of Joseph's anxieties, interests and agendas. However, I do want to pick up on some of Joseph's points. First, is a metacritical point which is not obviously pertinent to historical Jesus questions. Joseph mentions the role of biblioblogging and online discussion for pushing Q debates in certain directions, particularly the influential promotion of an alternative to Q by Mark Goodacre. I think there is more to be said about this. With the rapid rise of internet use in the 1990s and the turn of the millennium, Goodacre quickly took advantage of these changes in communication to become probably the most important online (and, if we can even maintain the distinction, offline) voice with academic capital and credibility. This was a time when Q scepticism was emerging in the aftermath of the historical Jesus culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s as the technical and detailed work of Q scholarship became popularly associated with the Jesus Seminar. The not unreasonable perception (though not entirely accurate either) of the Jesus Seminar as 'liberal' led to a backlash in historical Jesus scholarship, even among Q sympathisers. This was the general context where Goodacre stepped in to provide an alternative and promote what has now become known as the Farrer-Goulder-Goodacre hypothesis. But in a different world, perhaps another credible figure with a different model of the Synoptic Problem would have been a more acceptable alternative to Q. Perhaps if Martin Hengel were a

young, internet-savvy scholar at the turn of the millennium, his rethinking of the Synoptic Problem might have been more popular.¹

But counterfactual history is no substitute for the real thing and history effectively left us with Q and a dominant alternative (and that is without noting the differences within each tradition). So, what is the point of this particular metacritical discussion? Mainly it is to show that this is part of the scholarly context through which we currently navigate and potential audiences I might want to persuade or not unnecessarily isolate. Here it is worth explaining my implicit approach to the historical Jesus (or, as I prefer to study, the earliest traditions) which was to see if it could be done whatever model of the Synoptic problem was available. I suggested throughout that early themes and topics (e.g. purity, kingdom, certain 'Christological' ideas) could be understood to be present in traditions, perceptions, understandings, or memories about Jesus in Galilee and Judea in the 20s and 30s, no matter which model we chose. So, for instance, as I argued in the book, we can use a passage such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37) which reflects, among other things, debates over who should keep purity laws outside the Temple and when. Such discussions about purity are presumably connected with pre-Lukan themes (e.g. Mark 7.1-23; Matt. 23.25-26//Luke 11.39-41). We might add other arguments which suggest that such sentiments were early and more likely to be culturally specific to Galilee and Judea, e.g. the notion that purity was not deemed to concern Gentiles and may even have been a non-issue for those outside the perceived boundaries of Israel. We could further add that disputes and conflicts over issues of the Law common in the Synoptic Gospels were culturally plausible because there appear to have been plenty of disputes between different groups and individuals over interpretation of the Law (cf. *Ant.* 13.297-298). As far as we know, such debates over the details of the Law (rather than whether the Law or parts of the Law should be observed per se), do not appear to have been typical of the development of the movement in non-Jewish circles in the mid-first century onward. As explanations were added for puzzled audiences unfamiliar with such practices (e.g. Mark 7.1-5), we might further note that this was because it was an unusual *inherited* tradition. Who knows if the words of the parable of the Good Samaritan were ever said by the historical Jesus or if Jesus really did argue with Pharisees as Mark 7.1-23 tells us. But what we can say is that an argument of collective weight suggests that the theme of Jesus debating over the details of the interpretation of the purity was more likely than not an early one.

It is in this sense that I wanted to make a case for historical Jesus research not requiring a definitive solution to the Synoptic Problem. The argument above works with or without Q and with or without its leading popular contender today. And, of course, in some senses, this was pragmatic in that I would rather propose arguments that could bypass one of the most divisive areas in the field. Besides, would pages and pages outlining my favoured solution to the Synoptic Problem have convinced anyone? Unlikely, and certainly not in the limited space available which would be relatively worthless in comparison to (say) the extensive work of a Kloppenborg, an Allison or a Casey. This is not, I appreciate, a particularly edifying solution, but these sorts of compromises are part of the academic game. After all, I will not be alone in pointing out that historical Jesus scholarship does not usually spend much space on things I think are important (e.g. ideology, historical materialism) and so I wanted to give the space to something else.

This is not a criticism of Joseph as such and his questions are entirely reasonable, not least in the genre of a review. Moreover, Joseph is still correct when he says that sometimes a solution to the Synoptic Problem does matter given that different models require different literary, sociological and

¹ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 2000).

historical trajectories. But it can also be helpful to disassociate the historical Jesus (however configured) from, for instance, the social world of Q of the sort associated recently with Sarah Rollens' work.² Certainly they are both relevant to and can inform one another, but they are also two slightly different scholarly discourses working in two slightly different chronological periods. Nevertheless, the question is indeed one of emphasis and interests. Attending to the difference a given solution to the Synoptic Problem makes to understanding composition, chronology, scribal reflection, and so on, it remains important and others more suited to the task will continue those sorts of discussions. Indeed, it was for such reasons that the editors of *JSHJ* were keen to have an extended discussion of Alan Kirk's recent work on Q, Matthew and memory, despite it not being strictly in the subfield of historical Jesus studies (*JSHJ* 15.2-3 [2017]).³

Historical Change and the Individual

Joseph also picks up on a major emphasis of mine: the ways in which we understand the role of the individual in historical change and upheavals. He represents my position fairly in that I argue that scholarship overemphasises Jesus the Great Man as a dominant causal factor (despite some scholarly claims to the contrary) and the importance of socio-economic tendencies in such change and how humans work their way through circumstances not of their own making or those they have limited influence over. Although often implicit in my analysis, it is one which broadly fits into the tradition of historical materialism. Where Joseph appears to differ is on the idea that some people can stand out by inspiring, attracting or repulsing their audiences. Drawing on Vermes' claims about Jesus as a profound master of spiritual truths who brought issues back to the 'essence' of religion, Joseph argues that Jesus faced the cultural, political, theological, and colonial problems of his day with an ethnic dignity.

I think there is a difference of nuance between myself and Joseph here. Of course, individuals have an impact on their environs. But my problem with this characterization of Jesus is the subjective nature of the language of 'spiritual' and religious essences. I personally have some appreciation of the situations in which Jesus or those developing the earliest tradition found themselves, particularly tackling notions of systemic injustice. But (and perhaps this would have been more a question for Vermes) what does it mean to be a 'spiritual' master? What is the essence of religion? I am not sure I even know how it is possible to say whether such claims are accurate or not no matter how much data we had. To make such claims, I would argue, is to make theological value judgments rather than sociological or historical ones. Rather than making such claims my preference as a historian would be to see what historical actors are doing when they make claims about spirituality and religion (if they make such claims at all) and what people are doing when they understand them in such terms.⁴ We are on much firmer grounds as analysts if we do so.

² Sarah E. Rollens, *Framing Social Criticism in the Jesus Movement: The Ideological Project in the Sayings Gospel Q* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

³ Alan Kirk, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmission of the Jesus Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

⁴ In this sense, I am in agreement with Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent: or, How to Live in a Less than Perfect Nation* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005); Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Craig Martin, *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2010); Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); William Arnal and Russell T.

Jesus and the Law

Joseph also discusses exegetical issues, notably in relation to a topic that has long concerned us both: Torah and Temple. Joseph suggests that the early tradition is polyvalent. Joseph points out my argument on the lack of evidence for Jesus opposing the Temple in the call for repentance and the notion that there are no criticisms of Jesus doing so. Joseph takes a slightly different line on this, namely that the significance of a portrayal of Jesus as both endorsing and being a blood sacrifice. That may be the case, though taking on the language of sacrifice does not of course have to be antithetical to endorsing the sacrificial system, as the celebration of the Maccabean martyrs might suggest. Joseph notes Mark 1.40-44 and the possibility of it being an anti-priestly polemic, a testimony against the priests. Indeed, but this would depend on definition of 'anti-priestly'. If we assume for argument's sake that this is an early tradition, it remains clear that Jesus is not presented as defying laws about people with skin diseases: Jesus heals the man and leaves it to the priest to declare him clean as Leviticus commands (Lev. 13-14). Nevertheless, this could still be 'anti-priestly' in the sense that it is a provocative gesture and a dispute over authority to carry out healings, much like we see elsewhere in disputes throughout Mark 2-3.

That this is part of a Markan theme relating to the fate of the Temple is a strong argument. At the very least, it is not difficult to imagine a Markan audience thinking in such a way. But whether there is an anti-sacrificial theme (in the sense of opposing the very need for a Temple sacrificial system per se) in the Gospel tradition would take a longer debate and detailed interaction with Joseph's own important contributions. Indeed, there is much to commend in his broader chronological explanation about the transference of sacrificial symbolism to Jesus' death in distinction to the sacrificial cult. I also agree with some of the comments Joseph makes on different Gospel emphases, though I am not convinced that Matthew is 'correcting' Mark in Matt 5:23, at least not in the sense of providing a pro-Temple alternative. This is a relatively isolated saying and non-sustained theme (as opposed to a precise or sustained correction) which may, perhaps, be an earlier tradition given that it assumes the Temple still stands. Indeed, I would argue that there is no obvious and unambiguous opposition to the notion of animal sacrifice per se in the Synoptic tradition, even if there was opposition what the Temple presently stood for and who was running it. That may be something of an argument from silence but if the opposite were the case then presumably this would not have been overlooked.

Violence and the Kingdom

In relation to my discussion of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary traditions, Joseph also raises another question about which he has thought extensively: was Jesus 'nonviolent'? He points out my argument about the possibility of early and (seemingly) contradictory traditions promoting potential divine retribution and non-resistance in the present. Noting the work of Dale Martin and Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, Joseph steers the discussion in the direction of the recent revival of Jesus as figure more tolerant of violent resistance in the present with later Gospel tradition representing propaganda pieces for a more pacifistic Jesus. Joseph makes some helpful (counter)arguments in favour of a nonviolent tradition being in line with the ideas of the historical Jesus. I certainly have some sympathy with this argument as well as Joseph's qualification that Jesus should not be

confused with modern-day pacifist-types. I would still be cautious here. It is certainly possible that a more violent Jesus was 'covered-up' by later Gospel writers to ensure Christianity was not seen as a societal threat. Certainly, these were the sorts of issues later Christians faced (cf. 1 Pet. 2) but it becomes difficult to say with any certainty what earlier traditions might have been masked if later ideology did its job well.

But one of the reasons I retain some sympathy with Joseph's suggestions is because of the emphasis on eschatological retribution in the Gospel tradition where a new kingdom (or dictatorship, empire, or whatever the preferred term) will replace the old one. What we know about such concepts is that they could allow a coded anti-imperialism which Josephus craftily implied:

The head of gold represents you and the Babylonian kings who were before you. The two hands and shoulders signify that your empire will be brought to an end by two kings. But their empire will be destroyed by another king from the west, clad in bronze, and that this power will be ended by still another, like iron, that will have dominion for ever through its iron nature, which, he said, is harder than that of gold or silver or bronze. And Daniel also revealed the meaning of the stone, but I have not thought it proper to relate this, since I am expected to write of what is past and done and not of what is to be; if, however, there is anyone who has so keen a desire for exact information that he will not stop short of inquiring more closely but wishes to learn about the hidden things that are to come, let him take the trouble to read the Book of Daniel, which he will find among the sacred writings. (*Ant.* 10.209-10)

In some ways this classic instance of colonial or postcolonial rhetoric shows us how we might understand the handling of the Passover festival: a potentially tense festival for Roman rule but one which could be controlled with discipline and one where hope for the fall of the new Pharaoh would be worded carefully. As the Markan Jesus put it in the context of the Passover meal, 'I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mark 14.25). Whatever the 'historicity' of such a saying, it is presumably the case that understandings of the coming kingdom would mean the end of rulers in the present.

In this context, and acknowledging other possible reasons behind a nonviolent message, the pragmatism of nonviolence in certain contexts in the present makes further sense. Like other Jews, death by Rome or their lackies would always have been a very real possibility if the coded messages were not sufficiently coded. An analogy with Josephus' description of John the Baptist's death (*Ant.* 18.116-19; cf. *Ant.* 20.97-99; Acts 5.36) is important here: the popular John was killed by Antipas because he *might* have been a threat. Josephus gives no indication that John was going to lead an armed insurrection. As I argued in *Jesus and the Chaos of History*, the Markan account of John's death downplays the possibility of John the violent insurrectionary (cf. Mark 6.20),⁵ and not because it was covering up such an issue. Rather, John the Baptist reveals how dangerously ambiguous a popular eschatological message could be and perhaps this was the fate of Jesus whose death was remembered as that of a violent insurgent or bandit (cf. Mark 15.7, 16, 27). Getting nonviolence right really was a matter of life and death in these contexts and Jesus and his followers would have known exactly what was at stake. This was a world where life could indeed be nasty, brutish and short.

⁵ Roger D. Aus, *Water into Wine and the Beheading of John the Baptist: Early Jewish-Christian Interpretation of Esther 1 in John 2:1-11 and Mark 6:17-29* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

Joseph has one (commendable) way of understanding violence. I would suggest another, whether it contradicts Joseph's I am not sure (on the grounds that I am not sure whether our earliest sources would have seen contradictions where we sometimes do): the violence of eschatological retribution should be understood in terms of Marx's understanding of religion as 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.'⁶ In this instance, and whether we like it or not, the predictions of, and assumptions about, an imminent kingdom work with the knowledge that a level of violence on a dramatic, divine scale was required to overthrow the military might of the imperial order. Put another way, the Gospel tradition shows some awareness of what we might call structural or systemic violence and it is a vision that would continually remerge in the history of eschatological visions likewise challenging the violence that underpinned and underpins feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. Perhaps rather than displacing our understandings of violence and nonviolence to the distant and convenient past we would do well to understand why they continually recur and what we can do to address, or indeed harness, the concerns and energy they raise.

⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 131.