

The Historical Jesus as Charismatic Revolutionary Prophet

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand Jesus historically and categorize him sociologically as a *charismatic revolutionary prophet* according to the norms of First Century Jewish society and Max Weber's Theories of Legitimate Rule. We begin by noting the apparent risk of historical Jesus studies turning into scholarly self-portraiture and how the move back to a genuinely historic Judaism (as in Meyer [1979] or Wright [1996]) is the only way to avoid it. Arguing that the primary texts of the Gospels are reliable sources of historical information about Jesus, we then move on to a sociohistorical reading of Luke 4:16-30, from which we can observe Jesus participating in a First Century Jewish worship community and a recognizably Palestinian Honor/Shame society. Moreover, we observe that Jesus' announcement (that the end of Israel's exile was being accomplished through him) would be understood in that context as a *prophetic* statement, thus locating Jesus on the religious map of First Century Judaism as a prophet. Once we have recognized Jesus' First Century status as a prophet, we can utilize Weber's categories to define Jesus sociologically as a *charismatic* prophet, a categorization we nuance further by applying Swenson's (2009) classification of *revolutionary*.

Keywords: Historical Jesus, N.T. Wright, Max Weber, Charismatic, Revolutionary, Prophetic, Honour/Shame, Judaism

Over the past two hundred years many have undertaken the attempt to reconstruct a so-called "Historical Jesus," wresting the first century Galilean prophet free from the hands of an overbearing ecclesial dogmatism. While by no means the first to attempt such an undertaking, Albert Schweitzer's (1906) publication of *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (better known today as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) has been widely attested as the watershed moment in modern historical Jesus scholarship, outlining the processes and results of the major historical Jesus studies to his point in time (Wright 1999).

However, until comparatively recently, one Questioning question has remained conspicuously unasked.

While all efforts at reconstructing a historical Jesus naturally appeal to history itself, often little serious attention has been paid to mapping Jesus onto the actual realities of First Century Palestinian society and ancient Jewish religious expectation as understood and interpreted by the people of his day. More often, the variously construed historical Jesuses have had far more in common with the worldview, philosophy, and personality of the individual constructor. This has formed an interesting collection of varyingly veiled scholarly self-portraits (McKnight 2002), but not a Jesus who fits recognizably into a First Century Galilean society. This danger was recognized already by Schweitzer, and he lamented it. But he did not, conspicuously, avoid it himself (Wright 1999; 2019).

As a result of Schweitzer's pessimistic conclusion about ever reconstructing a truly historical Jesus, and the challenge such a conclusion put to traditional Christian orthodoxy, serious study of the historical Jesus in his Jewish context was largely relativized or ignored in many spheres of the Church and the academy from the 1910's through the 1960's. Whether, as in the case of Karl Barth (or in a very different way, Rudolph Bultmann and his school of existentialist theologians), such an attempt seemed inimical to real faith (Mueller 1972), or, in a darker reality, this ignorance reflected the well attested sub-Christian strand of doctrinal anti-Semitism (Wright & Bird 2019), inroads to historical Jesus work became significantly rarer than in the previous two centuries. And whenever they were cautiously traveled, they were even more rarely the dusty, winding roads of a charitably realistic, sociologically responsible historic Judaism.

That is, until comparatively recently. Owing a great deal to the more charitable view of Judaism following the Second World War (Wright & Bird 2019) and the greater understanding of ancient Jewish religious life afforded by the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Wise, Abegg, and Cook 2005), a new wave of historical Jesus scholarship has come to the fore, beginning with the landmark work of Ben Meyer (1979) and moving through such modern luminaries as Marcus Borg (1983), E.P. Sanders (1985), and N.T. Wright (1996, 1999). This cohort of scholars is by no means monolithic, but they do hold one thing in common. They each possess nerve enough to ask the deceptively simple question which the rest of this brief study will now also ask: *What happens to our view of the historical Jesus when we remove him from the many reconstructed worlds of modern Western scholarship (in how many paintings is Jesus European or American?) and place him firmly instead in the societal, religious, and political realities of First Century Palestine as conceived of and understood by First Century Palestinians?* As we will now move on to argue, when we do so we find that the Jesus we meet in the Biblical text is a historically identifiable figure whose person and mission fits completely within the societal realities of *his* world.

We will argue, based on a socio-historical reading of Luke 4:16-30, that the Jesus which we encounter in the text of Scripture and in historical study maps best onto the ancient Israelite prophetic tradition. Once we have established that basis, we will move on to examine whether we can use the sociologist's toolkit to recognize exactly what kind of prophet Jesus was (see Swenson 2009:118-129). By examining Jesus in light of Max Weber's Theories of Legitimate Rule (Pierluigi 2005) and Swenson's (2009) derivations thereof, we will argue for a Jesus who fits best in his historical context as a *charismatic revolutionary* prophet. If these propositions are sound, we will be able to conclude that it is only when he stands in the social world of First Century Palestine (and no other) that the Jesus we meet in Scripture is a historically verifiable, sociologically recognizable figure.

The Challenge of Using the Gospel Texts

One of the most significant challenges facing any serious student of the historical Jesus is the history of textual interpretation. Since at least 1910, it has been fashionable in the critical study of the four Gospels (our primary texts on the life and teaching of Jesus) to look for the historical/sociological situation of the various Gospel writers behind the text, and then to see those scenarios mapped back onto their presentations of the Jesus tradition (Wright 1992), thus making the Jesus they present a vehicle through which they can address the problems that have arisen in their distinct communities. While there are demonstrable merits to such an approach, the inherent risk is that the Jesus of the Gospels becomes something of a spiritual *terra nullis* floating six inches above the ground in a literary freedom which does not allow for serious history. And so, we are once again confronted with the same problem of looking at a Jesus who stares back at us through an individual author's eyes rather than his own. Such criticisms have led many more theologically inclined thinkers back to a willful ignorance of historical Jesus study in defense of the Scripture's credibility, thus reopening Lessing's "nasty big ditch between history and faith" (Wright 1992:7). This is something which must be corrected.

Perhaps more accessibly than any other author in the last twenty years (both in level of writing and acceptability to orthodoxy), N.T. Wright has sought such a correction. He argues that just as we can understand who John the Baptist was in light of First Century history, or Paul, or Herod, so too can we understand Jesus, and moreover, Jesus as he is presented to us in the Gospel accounts (Wright 1999). While no historian or author can fully escape the shackles of seeing history through the lens of their time or situation, Wright argues we should not take that to mean that the Jesus we meet in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and (much more controversially) John is an ahistorical, asocial figure, or a disembodied literary character, ready to dance to whichever tune the children in the marketplace are playing. Nor should we think that just

because the authors may have been inclined to believe what they were writing was theologically true, it must therefore be *de facto* historically corrupted.

Rather, by taking the necessary time to understand the socio-historical/religious world in which each of the Gospel accounts are set, we can encounter a Jesus who is totally recognizable as a First Century Jewish prophet in his own right (Wright, 1999). One who, in any interpretation of the events surrounding him, can only be seen to stand as such. Indeed, Malina (2002) argues that when we do so there are at least five realities about the historical Jesus of which we can be certain: Jesus proclaimed theocracy, he formed a political faction, he was concerned with Israel alone, he spoke only of the God of Israel, and he necessarily spoke of political religion and political economy.

Examining the Socio-historical Setting

An example would be helpful at this point. Let us offer as evidence the account we find in Luke 4:16-30 of Jesus reading the Scriptures and preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth.

Cultural Identifiers

By entering the synagogue on the Sabbath day, we already encounter a Jesus who exists within a faithful Jewish community (see esp. Exodus 20:8-10), and who is given the right to read Scripture in the community. By noting in verse 17 that the scroll was “given to him (καί ἐπέδόθη αὐτῷ),” we can observe that this is an act of *acquired honor* within his community (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992), attained most likely because of the wisdom and teaching we hear about in Luke 2:51-52 and 4:14-15. This requires further explanation.

The ancient Mediterranean world was characterized by what anthropologists have termed the *Honor/Shame Paradigm*. “Honor could be *ascribed* or *acquired*. Ascribed honor derives from birth . . . Acquired honor, by contrast, is the result of skill won in the never-ending game of public challenge and response . . . Honor is a limited good, so if one person wins honor, someone else loses” (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310). This definition will become important as we move on and examine the crowd’s response to Jesus’ seemingly self-aggrandizing claims.

Already, at this most basic level of cultural identification, we encounter a Jesus in the Biblical text who is a man fitting firmly within the social norms of First Century Palestine.

A Prophet, Like One of the Prophets?

Moving beyond these basic cultural identifiers that help us perceive Jesus as a socially recognizable First Century Palestinian, we must now examine what it is about his particular message that helps us locate him on the religious map of his day as a Jewish *prophet*. To do so, we need look little further than the passage he chose to read that fateful sabbath, Isaiah 61:1-2.

The whole book of Isaiah was theologically (and politically) freighted in Israel by the time we reach the First Century. For a once sovereign and predominantly theocratic nation, suffering under the weight of multiple foreign oppressions (Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and now Roman, Wright 1999), one can easily see how a text like this would stir weary hearts and Scripture-soaked imaginations. It promises that God will establish Israel's rightful place at the head of the nations and pay out the oppressors in their own kind, while at the same time comforting his people and making all things new.

As Wright (1999) astutely observes, by the time of Jesus these long foreign oppressions were being interpreted as an extension of *exile*. Recalling the scenario which prompted the Old Testament's prophetic corpus, Israel had failed in its covenant obligations to YHWH, had become idolatrous and sinful, and thus had the various curses described in the covenantal texts (principally Deuteronomy 27-30) meted out to them. The greatest of these was the national shame of exile to Babylon and beyond in 586 B.C.E. (2 Chronicles 36:20), and (even when some of the exiles eventually did return) ongoing national oppression by others. Israel was no longer its own nation under God.

However, by the early First Century things had reached a fever-pitch of expectation (Wright 1999). Building primarily on prophetic texts such as Daniel 7 and 9, which predicted the exile would endure 490 years, a growing number of theories and movements began to rise within the century before and after Jesus predicting that the time had in fact come for the exile to end and for God to restore his people (Wright & Bird 2019). Examples of these range from the martial-political (like the Zealots cotemporary with Jesus or the Maccabean rebels we read about some generations before in 1-4 Maccabees), to the strictly religious (such as the Qumran community – Wise et al. 2005), to those who mixed both together (as we encounter with the grassroots Pharisaic movement – Wright & Bird 2019). One way or another, many Jews by the time of Jesus were predicting the end of exile and the restoration of God's kingdom to Israel in their lifetime, and multiple leaders were uttering "prophetic" calls to get on board with *their* movement or miss out (Wright 1999, see also Catchpole 2006). Our present argument contends that the Jesus we encounter in Luke 4:16-30 is utterly recognizable within this historical contextual matrix of prediction and expectation.

The passage Jesus selects is one that serves three important functions in his social setting. As well as serving the role of programmatic statement for his missionary policy (good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, etc.) it also taps into a stream of scriptural allusion to both the aforementioned end of exile theology which excited his contemporaries (pronouncing the year of the Lord's favor, as in verse 19, was to echo Exodus language, and everyone knew that Exodus was the great story about how slaves go free) and Israel's ancient prophetic tradition, particularly the healing miracles of Elijah and Elisha (Wright & Bird 2019). By taking into account Jesus' personal addendum to the passage in verse 21, ("Today as you listen this Scripture has been fulfilled," i.e., fulfilled *in me*), Jesus would be seen

by his contemporaries as equating himself with the mysterious Servant of the Lord figure in Isaiah's prophecy, elsewhere identified as the Son of Man (provocatively so in the context of Daniel 7) who is anointed to defeat God's enemies and receive the eternal kingdom. To weave together this matrix of religious and social ideas in a First Century Galilean synagogue was to declare the end of exile. And to declare that such a reality was being fulfilled "*in me*," was tantamount to claiming kingship (read *messiahship*). The kingdom and the prophetic, the monarch and oracle, meld into one role at the end of exile.

At this point one can quite easily draw lines to each of Malina's (2002) five historical certainties surrounding Jesus: (1) he certainly *proclaimed theocracy* by declaring the arrival of God's kingdom and the end of exile; (2) *he formed a political faction* by calling his hearers to personal allegiance, as all messianic movements did; (3) *he was concerned with the people of Israel alone*, insofar as his message was *to* them so that *through* them God's kingdom would expand to include the nations; (4) *he spoke only of the God of Israel*, all the while insisting Israel's God was now reaching out to the whole world; and (5) *he necessarily spoke of political religion* (once again utilizing kingdom of God language) *and political economy* (this kingdom would embrace the poor and needy while challenging the rich and complacent).

This complex world of thought (backed up, as the Gospel accounts go on to relate, by symbolic acts of healing and judgement) tapped into the long socio-religious memory of Israel's royal-prophetic tradition, which Scot McKnight argues played a significant role in why people were willing to follow a no-name Galilean artisan in the first place (McKnight 2002).

Understanding the social setting of Jesus' initial statement in the synagogue at Nazareth also helps us come to terms with the somewhat obtuse nature of the exchange which follows Jesus' abbreviated homily in verses 22-30. Recalling Malina and Rohrbaugh's (1992) definition of the Honor/Shame Paradigm, we see that while the Nazarene audience are previously disposed to offer Jesus a modicum of honor, and are in fact significantly impressed by the grace of his words (verse 22), they are nonetheless not prepared to tolerate one of their own reaching above his station to the height of prophetic/messianic self-honorifics. Therefore, recalling that honor is a "limited good" (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310), they set about challenging Jesus' claim with the intention of shaming him back into place. "*Isn't this Joseph's son?*"

Jesus' response seems to do more harm than good (though a closer reading of the entire Luke-Acts narrative might show this was always part of the point). After quoting a popular proverb (a quick wit can gain one honor in a debate – Malina 1996),

in a shocking reversal, amounting almost to a slap in the face to his hearers (perhaps even his own family), Jesus declared that the people who would benefit from his movement would not, after all, be the people of Israel as they stood. The people who would benefit would be the outcasts, the foreigners . . . Indeed, when all is said and done, pagan widows and gentile cripples might find themselves in a better position than

some Israelites, if they make the right kind of response God expected of his people. (Wright & Bird 2019:201)

Shocking though reversals of this kind may have been to Jesus' hearers (indeed, shocking enough for an attempted honor killing, as in verse 28-29, see also Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992), they were not dissimilar to the kind of rug-pulling typical of the prophetic genre. (The ironic book of Jonah comes to mind as a prime example, a parallel which Jesus himself seemed happy to draw, i.e., Matthew 12:39).

Through close examination of the social setting presented to us in the text of Luke 4:16-30, we have demonstrated that Jesus stands firmly and historically recognizably in the mould of a First Century Jew tapping into the nation's prophetic imagination at a time of national crisis to undergird his own messianic ministry. However, the shocking roundabout on Israel's expectations of deliverance at the end of the passage forces us to examine more briefly the second aspect of our thesis. Having understood Jesus in his *Sitz im Leben*, can we apply the sociologist's toolkit to recognizably define what kind of prophet he was/saw himself as being?

An Analysis of Jesus' Prophetic Authority

Influential German sociologist Max Weber described three types of legitimate rule or authority: Traditional authority, rational-legal authority, and charismatic authority (Pierluigi 2005). For the purposes of our study, we will only examine the last of these categories, charismatic authority, because Weber saw it as the type of prophetic figure we have just been arguing Jesus was (Pierluigi 2005).

Weber described *Charisma* as, "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which they are set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Pierluigi 2005:398). This definition tracks well with the coverage of and response to Jesus' ministry we find elsewhere in the Gospel accounts, as well as with the particular Lukan passage cited above.

Weber moves on to note that the influence of a charismatic leader's authority is legitimized by faith in that leader's ability, "to preserve moral influence and prosperity for their followers" (Pierluigi 2005:398). This is precisely what Jesus is offering in his quotation and personal declarative fulfillment of Isaiah 61 (freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the year of God's favor: i.e., the end of exile and coming of God's kingdom). However, as Weber goes on to caution, because charismatic authority is borne on the back of faith in and support for the individual, when such faith/support fades, so too does the authority (Pierluigi 2005). Once again, this is precisely what we see in the reaction of the Nazarene synagogue community, who remove Jesus' honor (read Weberian *authority*) in their community after a perceived public shaming (Luke 4:28-29, Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992).

If the Weberian analysis conclusively confirms our basic thesis that Jesus was a sociologically recognizable *charismatic* prophetic figure based on an examination of the textual evidence, we can and should (cautiously) move one step further into nuance to complete the picture. Swenson (2009) identifies from Weber's typology at least six varieties of prophet: the founder, the lawgiver, the ethical (exemplary or teacher), the reformer, the renewer, and the mystagogue. While a reconstructed historical Jesus could (and has!) be made to fit any of these categories, we are striving for the reality in which he fits best as a First Century Galilean. Though John Dominic Crossan (2010) argues for Jesus the ethical exemplar, and Marcus Borg (1983) a mixture of exemplar and mystagogue, the conclusion Swenson draws (while admittedly using Jesus as an example, not an explicit argument) is that he fits best in precisely neither of these. Rather, utilizing a category not easily identifiable in Weber but clear from the histories of religions school, he promulgates Jesus as a *revolutionary* prophet (Swenson 2009).

Swenson defines the revolutionary prophet as one who "begins with an established religious tradition but changes it radically according to a new revelation; the result is a *new religious movement* or group" (Swenson 2009:119, emphasis his). This beginning with the established tradition is what distinguishes the revolutionary prophet from Weber's *founding* prophet. The founding prophet claims uniquely new and apocalyptic revelation from the divine, that which was unknown before it was revealed to the founder (Swenson 2009). The revolutionary, however, remains ontologically bound to a previously understood foundation. While their message may be a sufficiently shocking in its new interpretation of or spin on a pre-existing tradition (to the point of unrecognition by other adherents within the tradition) it remains an interpretation of or spin on a pre-existing tradition, not a revelation *ex nihilo*.

At the same time, however, we must mark a careful distinction between the revolutionary prophet and the *renewing* or *reforming* prophet. Although similarly linked to an existing tradition (hard lines at this point are difficult and unadvised), the revolutionary prophet is much freer to expand, deconstruct, and even change the tradition than the renewer or (particularly) the reformer (Swenson 2009). The renewer attempts to breath fresh life into the tradition when it has gone stale. The reformer seeks to bring the tradition back to purity. For both, the goal *is* the tradition. The revolutionary (while perhaps motivated by similar ambitions of renewal and purity) goes beyond each, willing to create new traditions and movements out of the old based on new revelations.

Once again, an exploration of our text describes just such a scenario. Jesus reworks a classic passage of Israel's Scriptures (while maintaining their status *as* sacred Scriptures) to include a faithful pagan audience and potentially exclude a complacent Jewish audience based around the new revelation that the message of this text (God's coming kingdom and the end of exile) is being fulfilled in Jesus' own person and public ministry. Going further, as Swenson (echoing Stark 1996) attests,

when the early Christians believed that Jesus rose from the dead, this myth [*myth being used here in the technical sense of a story which gives meaning to a people group, not the falsely reductionist concept of simply 'an untrue story' -SM*] went beyond the reformation of Jewish doctrine and actually changed it. One could also consider the tradition within early Christianity that Jesus was believed in not only as a prophet (like Isaiah or Jeremiah in Judaism) but also as the Son of God or, in effect, as divine. This belief would have been a revolutionary (indeed a blasphemous) teaching and would qualify Jesus as a revolutionary prophet. (Swenson 2009:126)

It is from this vantage point that we can more readily see why the assumptions of Crossan (2010) and Borg (1983) about Jesus as ethical exemplar or mystagogue are mistaken. While Jesus' prophetic ministry *borrow*s heavily from each category, it is not built *upon* them. Rather, the new ethic is born out of the revolutionary (and historically rooted) reality of God's kingdom arriving in person (offering good news to the poor and love to the outcast) which results in and is typified by a remarkable, incarnational closeness with the divine. This understanding comes only if we work in the right direction historically. If we start with modern religious conceptions and categories and then work them back into Jesus and the Gospel texts, we will only end up seeing the "reflection of a liberal Protestant face at the bottom of a deep well" (Wright & Bird 2019:179). We must instead begin with the world of First Century Jewish hope, society, and Scripture. Only then can we avoid the missteps of past scholarship and meet a truly historical Jesus.

Conclusions

We have argued above that for Jesus to be a historically recognizable, sociologically identifiable figure we must understand him in the social, political, and religious context of his First Century Jewish world. We have examined how, despite the protests of some modern scholarship, the Jesus we encounter in the Gospel texts (specifically in the example of Luke 4:16-30) fits the socio-cultural and socio-religious evidence from that period, and how on that basis (and that basis alone) we can confidently identify him sociologically as a charismatic revolutionary prophet.

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