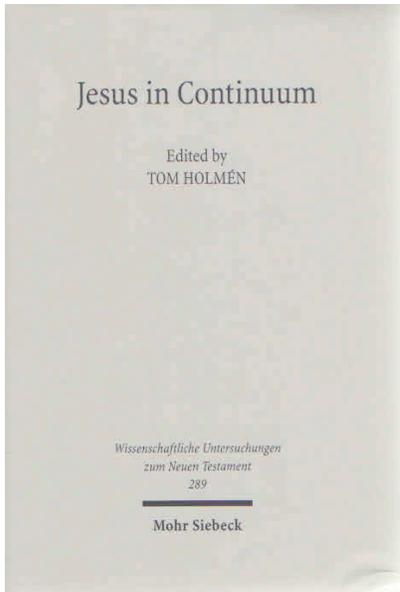


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**Tom Holmén, ed.**

***Jesus in Continuum***

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For those frustrated with the many portraits of Jesus that have emerged in the last several decades of historical Jesus scholarship, this collection hopes to offer a new way forward. Editor Tom Holmén challenges scholars to look anew at how the concept of difference helps us understand the historical Jesus—not just how Jesus differed from features of his contemporary milieu but also how he differed from later Christianity. This method, which he has introduced in previous publications, is coined the “continuum” approach. The present volume is laid out as a series of case studies in which each contributor asks how a dimension of Jesus is different from Judaism or the Greco-Roman world and then how it differs from later Christianity. There is, however, no assumption of a systematic development: “Jesus may have adhered to or departed from early Judaism, and again, early Christianity may have adhered to or departed from the Jesuanic proclamation.... The continuum approach thus challenges scholars to explain ‘why’” (x). In his own contribution, he examines the theoretical implications of using “difference” as a heuristic category. His goal is to find a way to understand this as more than a criterion of authenticity. This is a badly needed contribution, for Jesus’ dissimilarity, once a popular indicator of the authenticity of his words and deeds, has been roundly critiqued for creating a Jesus who bears no connection to his environment. Holmén uses the continuum method to probe Jesus’ teachings on love, sinners, fasting, and divorce,

demonstrating that one learns different things depending on whether one compares these features to Judaism or to later Christianity. In particular, early Christians were well aware that they could not reproduce every part of Jesus in their lives: “Jesus’ identity, recognized and upheld by his followers, was such that he could not be followed in all things” (40).

After Holmén’s opening essay, Gerd Theissen sets out to use the continuum framework to rethink the “universal” and “radical” character of Jesus, eschewing the old criterion of dissimilarity and working instead with contextual plausibility. Within Judaism, he proposes, Jesus was seen as a “liberal Jew” who universalized the message of Judaism to make it applicable to non-Jews, while within Christianity he became “radical Jew” who focused on “elements that distinguished Jews from non-Jews” (44). Universalizing, Theissen argues, is evident in Jesus’ teachings and activities, which were presented in such a way that they broke down barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Later Christians were the ones who took these universalizing tendencies out of their Jewish contexts. In fact, this was a strategy for survival. As he explains, “the first Christians developed and radicalized precisely those Jewish features that were hard to accept in the pagan world” (53), such as nationalized messianism or ethical stipulations only applicable to Jews. Following scholars of the cognitive science of religion such as Pascal Boyer, Theissen ends with an intriguing proposal, that the counterintuitive nature of these dimensions (universalism and radicalism) might account for early Christianity’s spread: the strange or radical ideas in Jesus’ teachings are smuggled in by the familiar and universal dimensions.

Michael F. Bird then examines the relationship between Jesus’ teachings about salvation and the Gentiles and the later deliberate effort by early Christians to target Gentiles for conversion. The question Christians eventually had to grapple with was, “what kind of Gentile could be admitted to the group?” Relying strongly on Luke-Acts, Bird focuses on Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Christians; the former especially opened conversion to non-Jews and linked the movement with Paul. Rather than hiving these groups off from one another, Bird sees them as representative of intra-community debates, complete with “cross-fertilization” (76) about how best to achieve successful missionizing. Against the older perspective that saw the Gentile mission as a late development, Bird argues that it actually emerged rather early and that there were several different groups involved, sometimes cooperating, sometimes competing. Jesus himself was “open to receiving Gentiles when they exhibited faith in Israel’s God” (80). Even so, Jesus did not anticipate supersessionism—he hoped Israel would be integrally involved in the mission to Gentiles—but his teachings were the “germinal roots” (86) for the Gentile mission.

James G. Crossley follows with an exploration of why Jesus is remembered to have observed purity laws but later Christians did not, invoking socioeconomic explanation to

account for this development. Jesus shows no evidence of compromising the basics of food laws; his issues were with the interpretation of some purity practices. By looking at analogies in forms of social banditry (a problematic term, he admits), he observes that many revolutionary actions in the time of Jesus were rooted in socioeconomic circumstances that led people (e.g., John of Gischala and Jesus who burned Tiberias) to reinterpret the law for their own agendas. Jesus' "expanded" purity codes show concern for "people who could not or would not observe them" (105), otherwise classed as "sinners." This concern, moreover, provides space for the inclusion of Gentiles; as more Gentiles accrued to the group, probably with varying levels of commitment, food laws would have become even more lax to the point of "not bothering" (108).

The late Marvin Meyer deals with "[o]ne of the most enigmatic, elusive, and fascinating figures in the entire biblical narrative" (115), Judas Iscariot. He begins by outlining the ways that Judas is progressively maligned over time in early Christian literature, which stands in stark contrast to the generally positive depiction in the Gospel of Judas, then wonders how this transformation came about. It results, he argues, from the general tendency by Christians to shift the blame for Jesus' death from Romans to Jews, as Christians struggled with the cognitive dissonance of living in the Roman world. He suggests that "the role of Judas the betrayer, whose very name recalls the world for 'Jew', is meant to address the same issue" (128), deflecting the blame from the Romans. The Gospel of Judas's Christology, he concludes, further underscores that the passion narrative was not originally the key to all early Christian understandings of Jesus.

In a curious contribution, Riemer Roukema assesses the treatment of "gnostic" and "catholic" Christianities in the popular works of Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman. By obliging the Synoptic Gospels to represent "mainstream" or "catholic" Christianity, he compares their ideas to representations of gnostic Christianity, such as the Gospel of Judas and the Gospel of Thomas. He concludes that it is easier to imagine a trajectory from the historical Jesus to "catholic" Christianity than it is to "gnostic" Christianity, suggesting that "catholic" Christianity stands in stronger continuity with Jesus. It is not especially clear, however, why one should consider "mainstream" or "catholic" Christianity to be a coherent entity in such an early time period (or ever, for that matter, given the constant contestation of so many aspects of Christianity throughout history).

Four essays examine Jesus' relation to outsiders. Darrell L. Bock wonders what precisely Jesus did to get himself in trouble and uses a synthetic approach instead of focusing on disconnected sayings or units. He assesses a few "minor" irritants that may have contributed to Jesus' predicament: association with tax-collectors and sinners, Sabbath and healing controversies, and the like. The "major" irritants are familiar: the cleansing of the temple, the threat of future judgment directed at Jewish leaders, and the reorienting of

the Passover meal to be about Jesus' own significance. While many of these individual features can be found among Jesus' contemporaries, this particular configuration of irritants points to Jesus' "uniqueness" (208) and hence the reason for his fate. James H. Charlesworth speculates about Jesus' attitudes toward his enemies, based on the "genius" he cultivated to extend the love ethic, which had roots in Jewish teachings but was deployed rather differently by Jesus. André Gagné gives a sociological analysis of the insider/outsider rhetoric in Jesus' teachings. In his examples, Mark and Thomas, Jesus is remembered as cultivating a sectarian identity similar to that present at Qumran, but he seems to have departed from this somewhat by his willingness to extend teachings to outsiders. Mary J. Marshall explores ancient hospitality codes and how Jesus' teachings fit with them. Both Jewish authors and Greco-Roman authors share a concern for hospitality toward strangers, although the former often tie it to religious duty and righteousness. The historical Jesus, she argues, relied on hospitality during his travels and should be understood, in many meal scenes, as a guest who promoted "radical inclusiveness" (321). Early Christians tried to extend this emphasis on hospitality when missionaries went about their work but clearly ran into trouble, as illustrated by the New Testament epistles.

Some of the essays examine very broad themes, such as Mary Ann Beavis's contribution, which probes Jesus in his utopian context, looking both to Jewish utopia ideals and those that eventually surface in Paul's letters. Guiding her analysis is Doron Mendels's list of seventeen features that Hellenistic utopias and the Essenes have in common. She finds most of these to be present in Paul's letters. Jesus' utopian ideals came to expression in the (rather nebulous) kingdom of God, which she argues was "anti-political": it "deliberately downplayed explicitly nationalistic, restorationist, and particularist overtones and aspirations" (163) and was rather an ideology that endorsed God as a universal king.

Other contributions are narrowly focused, such as John S. Kloppenborg's treatment of the measure-for-measure aphorism (Q 6:38c//Mark 4:24//Clem. 13.2), a saying attributed to Jesus that bears strong resemblance to routine agricultural transactions well-attested in documentary papyri. In fact, "Greco-Egyptian agricultural loans ... offer the closest conceptual and verbal parallels to the measure-for-measure aphorism" (258). The saying as it was originally formulated is noteworthy because it is framed from the lender's perspective rather than the borrower's, perhaps indicating that, if the saying is authentic, then Jesus extended his message beyond those who were most economically disadvantaged. At the very least, the different ways the saying was used by later authors shows the creativity of the earliest authors for making the aphorism serve their own ends.

Setting his sights on Jesus' identity, Michael Labahn examines how Jesus was remembered as "God's envoy of eschatological transformation" (265) who did miraculous deeds. Extraordinary deeds, he argues, seem likely to be historical, although we only have access

to them through narrative, so his main interest is in the way they preserve “meaning behind memory” (289). By surveying Jewish literature, Labahn finds that God himself is usually depicted as the agent of miraculous events, suggesting that Jesus probably understood God as working through him to do extraordinary deeds. Later Christians reworked the stories to make Jesus himself the focal point so as to serve their own social interests and identity formation. “An agent can make a career,” Labahn surmises, “that leads him from being an agent to becoming a powerful character upon which people place their own hopes” (295).

Stanley Porter tackles the lofty topic of resurrection. He shows first that the Jewish precedents for resurrection are not as explicit as many believe, whereas the Greco-Roman ones are actually more developed than many (such as N.T. Wright, a frequent interlocutor in this essay) acknowledge. Paul moves beyond the underdeveloped ideas of resurrection in Jewish and Greco-Roman texts, giving new attention to the physical body and the individual experience, *inter alia*. Porter concludes that there is sufficient evidence to suppose that Jesus made some sort of prediction about his resurrection, although he comments only briefly on the event itself. Heikki Räisänen likewise analyzes a thorny topic, one that often makes theologians uncomfortable: Jesus and hell. In Jewish discourse, notions of hell are strongly correlated to insider-outsider language and often function to ensure insiders that their enemies will be punished. Early Christian discourse preserves the notion of future punishment but goes much further with these ideas, as in such vivid texts as Revelation and Apocalypse of Peter. In this matrix and by using some of the traditional criteria of authenticity, Räisänen concludes that it would have been normal for Jesus to speak about torment upon death, even hell. “How responsible theology should deal with it” (383) is left for theologians.

Markus Tiwald and Christopher Tuckett ask questions about Jesus’ continuity with central features of Judaism: Torah/temple and the Sabbath, respectively. Tiwald counters others who have claimed that Jesus, Paul, and early Christians opposed these aspects of Judaism, finding that even their ostensible criticisms of temple and Torah fit perfectly well *within* contemporary Jewish discourse. Jesus himself reinterpreted these aspects insofar as they played a role in his eschatological expectations of the kingdom. Jesus and Paul sorted out their ideas on a familiar playing field: they “remained Jews and we participants in an inner-Jewish discourse: the quest for the correct interpretation of God’s will” (408). Tuckett takes the opportunity to look broadly at the concept of Sabbath in Jewish and Christian texts, lest the analysis get bogged down in “whether Jesus did perform ‘work’ on the Sabbath” (411). He begins with the reminder that Jewish observance of the Sabbath was about more than the routine avoidance of work. Although he admits that there is nothing “startlingly new” (411) here, the essay is a fine way to cap off the volume by demonstrating that even some of the most studied topics can benefit

from a fresh methodology. There is little evidence to suggest that the earliest Christians challenged Sabbath observance from outset, but, of course, they later developed distinctive practices. What can be discerned about Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath is tricky; Tuckett finds that Jesus may have been openly "indifferent" (440) to Sabbath law. Sabbath controversies, however, seem related to Jesus' authority, so the issue is "exploited to focus and to sharpen this challenge by Jesus to his contemporaries about the nature and status of his activity" (442-43).

This is an enjoyable collection to read because most contributors follow the general framework of examining a feature of the historical Jesus in his context and tracing its continuities and discontinuities with what came before and after. Thus, one looks forward to how the comparison will play out in each essay. Moreover, the methodology is provocative within historical Jesus scholarship, which has for too long been wedded to the predictable routine of first outlining the historical context of Second Temple Judaism, then applying the so-called criteria of authenticity to collect the authentic teachings and deeds of Jesus, and finally stitching them all back together in a grand portrait of Jesus—rarely being phased by the fact that despite the agreed-upon criteria, we were still ending up with a multitude of (sometimes incompatible) Jesuses.

If there is a tension in this collection, it is that while the goal of the volume seems to be to fundamentally reassess the way we think about historical Jesus methodology, many contributors are still found relying on some of the traditional criteria of authenticity. Moreover, despite the innovative nature of the continuum approach, there are a number of unquestioned, and hence rather traditional, assumptions throughout these essays: several essays are still looking for what made Jesus unique or what he did to set later events in motion (Crossley rebuts this view in his essay: "we should not simply assume that Jesus caused everything that followed" [89]); some still assume Paul's writings alone are sufficient representatives of the early church; and some are remarkably confident in the historical reliability of Acts for the decades after Jesus' death. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Holmén wants to settle on finding "one Jesus" (x) to account for movement along each continuum—one can imagine how fruitful his methodology would be even without such an interest.

Happily though, many of contributors themselves reflect on the methodology of the volume. Crossley, for instance, recognizes that there could very well be a "strong discontinuity" (89) between Jesus and how Christians understood him, so relying too strongly on a continuum might be misleading. Perhaps one of the wisest assessments is found in Porter's essay, which contains a crucial caution:

One of the results of this investigation is to illustrate that ... creating disjunctions between Greco-Roman and Jewish or even Jewish and Christian perspectives runs the risk of distorting the evidence in a number of ways. One of the ways is in terms of creating false views of the relationships of these “worlds”. There were not Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, in the sense that they were equally viable alternatives. Nor was there a religious versus a pagan world, or a Christian and a non-Christian world. The Greco-Roman world was a world of religious cults, various people groups, and intertwined cultures. (343)

Many of the contributors are likewise careful to demonstrate that the ideas in Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman texts frequently overlap. In all, there are many thought-provoking essays here that challenge us to rethink how we have assessed data for the historical Jesus. Holmén’s volume has made a determined and welcomed effort to push the conversation forward, and it is a must-read for students of the historical Jesus.