

## THE HISTORICALLY JEWISH JESUS ENCOUNTERS ONE MODERN CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN: A CAUTIONARY TALE

The broader problems in any quest to find the historical Jesus are, after three centuries of questing, ones to which we are already well attuned. First, objectivity is something for which we continually strive—and yet, while it keeps us on track—it is not something which we will ever fully achieve. As John Meier has pointed out, “There is no neutral Switzerland of the mind in the world of Jesus research.”<sup>1</sup> Everybody writes from an ideological vantage point, with a particular worldview.<sup>2</sup> Second and in part a consequence of the limit to objectivity is an observation noted by Rudolph Bultmann and many others: that the resultant “historical Jesus” tends to look and sound amazingly like the scholar pursuing him, and that on a good day. The nature of Jesus research invites narcissism. A third problem is the nature of the sources (which are not after all interested in presenting the historical Jesus), the criteria by which one extracts from these sources the historical Jesus, and how best to focus one’s attention on these sources to recover the historical Jesus.<sup>3</sup> This last matter has been addressed by scholars in the following three ways: (1) by concentrating on the center of Jesus’ message as a teacher—a focus on his sayings—as the way to reconstruct the historical Jesus; (2) by focusing on the actions of Jesus, his behavior, as the most secure way of getting at the facts about Jesus; and (3) by looking at the external framework of Jesus’ life, death and its aftermath as a way to recover the historical Jesus. Each of these approaches has its problems and each yields only a limited picture, even when combined with another. Most comprehensive and compelling are those approaches which are clear about the criteria by which they are extracting evidence from the sources and which strive to work out the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and actions with the portrait of his life and

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<sup>1</sup>*A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 5.

<sup>2</sup>This is not surprising, given the religiopolitical significance of the subject, the faith bias of the key source material—Christian Gospels—and the fact that those who are most interested in recovering the historical Jesus are Christians and Jews of various stripes and often with an underlying faith agenda. While it might ruin a work of fiction, I have found that it is most useful to read the ends of books first when turning to quests for the historical Jesus. The final chapters tend to belie any claims to objectivity.

<sup>3</sup>The primary focus tends to be on the canonical New Testament Gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas*, but other sources utilized include: additional New Testament writings and extracanonical Christian writings, the first century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus and other early Jewish writings, the Roman historian Tacitus, and other Greek and Latin authors.

the reasons for his death.<sup>4</sup> A fourth issue is the end result. Given the nature of our sources, the most we can hope for is a fragmentary, hypothetical reconstruction of the historical Jesus by means of modern research—a far cry from the reality of the actual Jesus. It has been observed that “this ‘historical Jesus’ will always remain a scientific construct, a theoretical abstraction that does not and cannot coincide with the full reality of Jesus of Nazareth as he actually lived and worked in Palestine during the first century of our era.”<sup>5</sup>

A major problem that remains in historical Jesus research is locating Jesus within the Judaisms of his day. How are we to find the historically *Jewish* Jesus? It is clear that in the first century C.E. “Judaism was not monolithic but highly variegated throughout the Greco-Roman world, and diverse and complex even within the borders of Roman Palestine . . . the picture that has emerged is of multiple Judaisms, distinct Jewish religious systems, yet with connecting threads, indicators that they share a common legacy.”<sup>6</sup> There was no such thing as normative Judaism in the first century, but rather a great diversity and richness of Judaisms. One of the issues which creates difficulties for locating Jesus within these Judaisms is that the scholarship has swung from a maximalist to a minimalist approach (especially concerning the four best known groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots), rightly insisting that we have at most only sketchy outlines of the beliefs and practices of the various Judaisms of the day. This makes it *annoyingly* difficult to locate Jesus among the Judaisms of the first century in a way that is at once fair and nuanced, without moving back toward a monolithic construct of Judaism. Another significant piece of the problem is the polemical stance toward various Judaisms of our main source for the historical Jesus: The New Testament Gospels. In the end, it takes a major act of the will not to caricature the Judaisms of Jesus’ time, however unintentionally.

In attempting to locate Jesus within first-century Judaisms, many contemporary studies have sought to answer Joseph Klausner’s question: how was it that Jesus lived totally within Judaism, and yet was the origin of a movement that separated from Judaism, since *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing comes from nothing?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>But this is a formidable task.

<sup>5</sup>Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1.

<sup>6</sup>Sarah J. Tanzer, “Judaisms of the First Century CE,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 391. Among the “connecting threads,” though interpreted or criticized in varying ways, are: belief in one God, the concept of being a part of the chosen people Israel, the rejection of images in worship, the centrality of the Temple, the centrality of Torah, and the practice of circumcision.

<sup>7</sup>This is really a paraphrase of Joseph Klausner’s main thesis found in *Jesus of Nazareth: His Times, His Life, and His Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Macmillan, 1925) 9. Actually there is already a problem in the way Klausner thinks about this which is typical of much of Jewish and Christian scholarship: It assumes that

This seems like a worthy proposition, though the way it is understood tends to spawn an array of problems. It remains an impossible task for scholars to explain Jesus as totally within first-century Judaism, while at the same time explaining what is unique about Jesus such that he provided the starting point for a movement that separated from Judaism. Most of us have difficulty balancing this equation; and in the past, our tendencies to portray Jesus either as within Judaism or as unique have been determined or at least deeply influenced by our faith. Jewish scholars, often working in an apologetic mode and seeking to make Jesus less threatening to Judaism, have found Jesus totally within Judaism, which often leaves less than compelling explanations for his substantial disagreements with his contemporaries, his death, and how Jesus provides a point of origin for Christianity's separation from Judaism. Christian scholars, picking up on New Testament polemics and seeking to lift up Jesus' uniqueness and to assert the superiority of Christianity over Judaism have found a Jesus who stands over against Judaism—over against his Jewish upbringing and environment,<sup>8</sup> which often leaves one wondering “how it could be that Jesus grew up on Jewish soil”<sup>9</sup> (let alone what it is that Judaism and Christianity share as the so-called Judeo-Christian heritage). Furthermore, both of these approaches—Jesus as completely within Judaism and Jesus as completely unique—tend toward monolithic portraits of first-century Judaism! And much of the debate between these two poles of scholarship is framed around how best to understand Jesus' challenging attitude toward aspects of Jewish Law,<sup>10</sup> teachings, and practices, and his actions which were critical of the temple cult.

I feel compelled to ask whether or not the framing of the question (Jesus within Judaism . . . and yet Jesus unique) isn't already a major part of the problem. Maybe we could get less skewed results if we would take this as a two step process, asking first how it is possible to understand Jesus within the Judaisms of the first century. We might begin to do this by noting the ways in which Jesus' criticisms and challenges to Judaism are possible within first-century Judaisms. The Qumran community, for example, easily provides us with

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criticism of the Temple and law are incompatible with first century Judaism and ultimately lead out of it.

<sup>8</sup>Judith Plaskow refers to this as the rule of antithesis. See “Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 120.

<sup>9</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 18.

<sup>10</sup>Often in Christian interpretation, Jesus' criticism of the law tends to get pushed to its limits in order to explain how Paul could set aside the law in the name of Jesus. This is a perspective which does not understand criticism of the law as something which could happen *within* Judaism. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 53) points out that this does not explain how James and Peter found support for continuing the practice of the law in Jesus' teaching.

one illustration of a Jewish community which was highly critical of the way Torah was interpreted and practiced by Jews outside its community, and it seems likely that it also challenged the practices of the current Temple priesthood.<sup>11</sup> The second step would be to ask not so much about what it is that is unique about Jesus, but what it is about Jesus and the earliest understandings of Jesus which give impetus to the Jesus movement to break away from Judaism and place Jesus—now Christ—at the center.

Another factor typical of twentieth-century attempts to locate Jesus within Judaism is in fact geographical—the Galilee versus Jerusalem split.<sup>12</sup> This is a portrayal of the Jewish Jesus which works on two levels as it seeks to understand Jesus within Judaism and yet to understand how he is unique and often at odds with most of the Judaisms of his day. The first level is a clash of rural (Galilee) versus urban (Jerusalem) values and the clash of poor versus rich. The second level has to do with different kinds of Judaism: charismatic teacher/prophet critical of Temple practices and without regard for legal and ritual affairs (Jesus) versus an aristocratic Temple priesthood (Sadducees) and the upholders of the established religious order who were concerned that every aspect of life be invested with religious and ritual significance (Pharisees). This is a lot to lay on Jesus' geographical origins, and is in any case too simplistic when assessed by contemporary studies of Galilee which call into question the rural versus urban split (after all, the city of Sepphoris was booming just four miles down the road from Nazareth) and which have begun a closer study of the varieties of Judaism evidenced in Galilee.<sup>13</sup>

The issues are even more complicated for a theologian seeking to find the historical Jesus and to build a theology based on him. There are at least two ways to go: (1) To act as historian, making your own reconstruction of the historical Jesus and then moving on to the theological task. This involves an enormous and difficult first step for the theologian (let alone for the historian)—pre-scinding from theological evaluation in order to recover a historical Jesus. If one

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<sup>11</sup>This is just one example; there are many others from this time period, including some which involve disputes around specific laws and their interpretations (e.g., Sadducees vs. Pharisees) and some where the disputes are so substantial that the group involved looks from all but their own perspective to be outsiders among the Judaisms of their age (e.g., the Samaritans). Even today among the various branches of Judaism in North America, the debates continue often with strong language and often focused on the interpretation and practice of the Torah—but these too are disputes within Judaism.

<sup>12</sup>Some examples of this include Klausner, *Jesus*; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973) and *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983); Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

<sup>13</sup>A very useful collection of essays which should prove helpful in getting a broader sense of the Galilee in the first centuries is *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York and Jerusalem: JTS, 1992).

cannot step back from positions of faith and theology, the end result will be a "disembodied and un-Jewish Jesus."<sup>14</sup>

(2) To pick up where the historians leave off and to develop Christologies based on the historical Jesus, recognizing the relevance of the historical Jesus for faith and theology. This too involves a major preliminary task: critically assessing previous studies of the historical Jesus before choosing which among them you will appropriate for the theological task. I am left pondering how as a Christian theologian one goes about leaving the Jewishness of Jesus in place as one utilizes the historical Jesus for theology, and what it is that the theologian is after in seeking the historically Jewish Jesus. Will it ultimately be a case of "now you see him, now you don't?"

One Catholic theologian who has long demonstrated an interest in the historical Jesus, and in the historically Jewish Jesus in particular, is Hans Küng.<sup>15</sup> His work is useful as an illustration of one theologian's attempt to recover the historically Jewish Jesus and the pros and cons of such an endeavor. In his recently translated *Judaism between Yesterday and Tomorrow*,<sup>16</sup> he takes up the issue of the historically Jewish Jesus in a subsection entitled, "The Dispute Between Jews and Christians." He follows essentially the first model which I have mentioned, attempting to recover the historically Jewish Jesus and only then moving on to the theological task. The larger theological purpose of his discussion is aimed at the furtherance of Jewish-Christian dialogue, in particular the recognition that the one God of Israel is also the God of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as a theologian he recognizes that a dialogue with Jews will be over before it is started if one begins "from above" with the "triune God" and "God the Son," and therefore it is important to begin "from below" with "Jesus of Nazareth, the man and the Jew."<sup>18</sup> But already at this point one gets glimmers of a problem which will loom large in his study: he has confused the historically reconstructed Jesus with the real Jesus of Nazareth, whom, given the limits of our sources, we cannot know.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 10.

<sup>15</sup>This was certainly evident in his earlier work, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1976).

<sup>16</sup>*Judaism between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>17</sup>See *ibid.*, 318: "This God called Israel to follow the Torah, and the same God called the Church (which should not name itself Israel) to follow Jesus Christ."

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>19</sup>In fact, what he seems to mean by "from below" is the "earthly Jesus," whose life, ministry, and death are presented through a selection (basis unknown) of materials from the canonical Gospels. This "from below" Jesus should not be confused with either the historical Jesus or the full reality of the actual Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the values of Küng's study is that he seems well aware of many of the traditional pitfalls encountered in the quest for the historical Jesus. On the positive side he points out that Jesus as a historical figure can be investigated by the means and methods of modern history.<sup>20</sup> Among the broader issues, he notes the source problem—especially that the New Testament writings are “by no means disinterested documentary reports.”<sup>21</sup> Among the problems in recovering the historically *Jewish* Jesus, Küng emphasizes that while we must explain both the continuity and the discontinuity of the historical Jesus with Judaism, in the past the tendency has been to err too much on the side of Jesus' uniqueness, while in the present we have been over-eager to correct the balance, tending toward a Jesus who is so embedded in Judaism that it has become “difficult to recognize Jesus' own distinctive profile, and even impossible to understand why a religion different from Judaism came into being, one which from the beginning took his name and not that of anyone else.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, he says that we have erred by foisting virtually all of Jesus' controversies concerning the Law off on the early Christian communities and in essence turning Jesus into “a harmless liberal (and unoriginal) Pharisee.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, as a theologian he is very aware of why it is so difficult for Christians to discover the “‘Jewishness’ of Jesus,”<sup>24</sup> since what is at stake is more than Jesus; it is the uniqueness of Christianity. Of course the danger in outlining the pitfalls is that it helps the reader to notice just exactly how one has fallen into them!

Küng's approach to recovering the historically Jewish Jesus is revealed in a number of different ways. First, he is conversant with many different Jewish writers on the subject. In fact, most of his quotations are from Jewish writers. This would seem a positive way for a Christian theologian to balance the naturally differing tendencies of past Jewish and Christian scholarship on the historical Jesus. But many of those who have written on the historical Jesus have not done so critically—or have had their views persuasively challenged by both Jewish and Christian scholars. One needs to show more discriminating taste than Küng has done in selecting among Jewish writers on the subject. Another problem here is the way in which he uses these Jewish writers, by quoting them on some generalization about first-century Judaism or, better yet, about Jesus and first-century Judaism. He uses them in essence to set up a false contrast between Jesus and Judaism, which in the end supports his own view that Jesus is distinct from and superior to the Judaisms of his day.

A second way in which Küng reveals his own approach is by strong disagreement with the method and conclusions of E. P. Sanders in *Jesus and Judaism*.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 308.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 313.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 315; see also 310-16 and 329.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 307.

Sanders focuses on the *actions* of Jesus as more reliable than the words of Jesus for establishing the facts about the historical Jesus. Küng objects to this a priori assigning of the proclamation of Jesus to second place. In particular, he is concerned that the Sermon on the Mount should count "for the self-understanding and proclamation of Jesus."<sup>25</sup> The Sermon on the Mount forms the most significant base for Küng's reconstruction of the historical Jesus and, in fact, is carried over into his discussion of the ways in which the historical Jesus is meant to challenge critically modern day Judaism.<sup>26</sup> Yet, Küng nowhere establishes the criteria by which he is judging the Sermon on the Mount to be representative of the historical Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Sanders, according to Küng, attributes too many of Jesus' controversies over Jewish Law in the Gospels to the early Christian community and Paul. Küng, by contrast, assumes that virtually all of those places in the Gospels in which Jesus has a controversy with Jews are historically reliable.<sup>28</sup> Küng's overall evaluation is that Sanders renders Jesus "innocuous" and too much in agreement with Pharisaism.<sup>29</sup> Küng by contrast renders Jesus as standing over against Judaism, in essence, an outsider. He does nothing to attempt to understand the controversies as possible *within* Judaism, but in fact mistakenly assumes that criticism of Torah and Temple was not possible within early Judaism.<sup>30</sup>

How then does Küng go about recovering the historically Jewish Jesus? He focuses primarily on the sayings of Jesus, though he nowhere lays down any criteria by which he evaluates sayings as genuinely representative of the historical Jesus. He rules out the Gospel of John as being too late, though he appeals to John indirectly at several places in his portrayal of the historical Jesus. Secondly he utilizes the actions of Jesus (especially the cleansing of the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 687n.41.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 390-95.

<sup>27</sup>This need to be clear about the criteria by which he has decided which New Testament sayings should be attributed to the historical Jesus is not limited to the Sermon on the Mount, but in fact is typical of Küng's rather free appropriation of Jesus' New Testament sayings. Perhaps his lack of use of criteria has been hinted at in his assessment that "historically the Jesus tradition has proved to be relatively reliable" (313). Though the issue of criteria has historically proven itself to be exceptionally thorny and complex, there is no lack of attempts to discern appropriate criteria by which to attribute sayings to the historical Jesus. Among the most recent is the work of Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus seminar found in *The Five Gospels: the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>28</sup>Küng, *Judaism*, 316 and 365. Küng is eager to show continuity between Jesus and Paul on the subject of the law, and in particular that it is the historical Jesus' controversies with Judaism which ultimately give rise to the separation of Judaism and Christianity and not Paul.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 688n.41.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 353.

Temple and the relationship of that to his death<sup>31</sup>), and general outlines of Jesus' life, ministry and death.

Utilizing these sources, he turns to four groups of first-century Jews<sup>32</sup>—Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and Pharisees—to decide whether or not the historical Jesus should be identified with any of them. Implicit in all of his comparisons is the highly problematic Galilee split (rural and common folk, Jesus as a prophetic figure critical of Temple practices and without regard for legal matters) versus Jerusalem (urban and rich, the Jewish establishment represented by the Temple/Sadducees and legal-ritual concerns/Pharisees) which I discussed earlier.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, what he compares Jesus with are outmoded stereotypes of these four groups, demonstrating poor knowledge on his part and not based on current critical research. For example, according to Küng, the Pharisees represented the “option of moral compromise,” seeking “to offer ways out where it seemed all too difficult to observe the law.”<sup>34</sup> And while Jesus was like the Pharisees in many ways, “compared with all the Pharisees, Jesus is astoundingly liberal.”<sup>35</sup> Also in comparison with the Pharisees, Jesus “was not concerned with observing the Torah for its own sake, but with actual people;” Jesus “set over against the casuistic trivialization practised by certain schools of the Pharisees the primal purpose of the law” making love the decisive motive; and finally, Jesus “stressed the moral aspect of life in contrast to the purely formal aspect of the practice of the law.”<sup>36</sup> Despite Küng's own cautions about the tendency to exaggerate the contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees, one can hardly accuse him here of achieving historical accuracy in either his portrayal of Jesus or the Pharisees. Küng's overall results in comparing Jesus to four groups of Jews, not surprisingly, always demonstrate how Jesus was unique,<sup>37</sup> distinct from and better than each of these groups. Another problem is that he does not take seriously the great variety of first-century Judaism by limiting himself to these four groups, and his portrayal only lightly veils an assumption that first-century Judaism was mono-

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<sup>31</sup>Interestingly enough, this is Sanders's key argument! So despite Küng's strong critique of Sanders, they are in agreement on this central issue.

<sup>32</sup>These are the four groups explicitly mentioned by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus.

<sup>33</sup>See Küng, *Judaism between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, esp. 319, 327, 335, 340-41.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 324-25.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 328-29. This last contrast between moral and formal aspects is taken up again by Küng (369) to draw a contrast between the Jewish Christians and the rabbis. One can see how such a loaded contrast is headed in the direction of a continuing contrast between Christianity and Judaism.

<sup>37</sup>E.g., in his conclusions about the Zealots Küng says: “Thus, rightly understood, Jesus was more revolutionary than the revolutionaries” (*ibid.*, 321). This can also be found in Küng's contrast with early Judaism in general (331-32).

lithic and that the Pharisees represented what was normative.<sup>38</sup> This becomes more transparent in his later arguments when he writes about post-70 CE Pharisaism *reestablishing* itself as Jewish orthodoxy.<sup>39</sup>

When Küng turns to the question of "Who is to blame for Jesus' death?"<sup>40</sup> he begins in a way that is promising from a historical perspective by questioning whether there ever was a trial, noting that the Pharisees are not mentioned in reports of a trial and by pointing out that while many charges may be inferred from the Gospels as a whole, only one charge—a saying against the Temple—is formally made.<sup>41</sup> It would have been even more promising from a historical perspective had Küng also mentioned the great variation in the Gospel accounts with regard to the Sanhedrin (and questions about how clearly defined the Sanhedrin was in this period!) and that Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus is focused on the chief priests in the Gospels in a way that suggests the greatest historical plausibility (and not on the Jewish people or even on the Pharisees). Even though he ends his discussion by invoking the Second Vatican Council and making it clear that there should never have been talk of the collective guilt of the Jewish people,<sup>42</sup> his primary arguments move in a muddled way (though probably unintentionally) toward a heightening of Jewish responsibility, once again without much regard for historical accuracy. Küng moves back toward a trial by the Sanhedrin based on the charge of Jesus' criticism not only of the Temple, but also of the law and their representatives. He argues that crucifixion was not only a Roman punishment, but a Jewish punishment. In essence the Jewish charge was a "religious misdemeanor" that was reframed by the Jewish authorities into a political charge of high treason (punishable by death) which would be plausible to Pilate and the Romans when the Jewish authorities handed him over to them.<sup>43</sup> This muddled account of Jesus' death and the issues of Jewish and Roman responsibility clearly do not further our historical understanding (if anything it is a case of two steps backwards), though it does further Küng's own point of view that Jesus died because he was a religious troublemaker, even though the only way that one could be sure that the Romans would put him to death was to see to it that he was branded a political revolutionary. All of this is doubly offensive: both for its lack of historical accuracy and given that this is a book which ostensibly is seeking to curtail the propagation of anti-Semitism. Suffice to say that the question of responsibility for the death of Jesus is far more complex and obscure than Küng allows for.

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<sup>38</sup>Though for Küng the Sadducees are the center of Judaism in Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup>Küng, *Judaism*, 358-59.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 333-36.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 334-35.

So, after all these contrasts and the issue of Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus, in what ways is Küng able to find a Jesus who was historically Jewish? Well, Jesus' mother was a Jew and "so Jesus grew up quite naturally as a Jew." And, "The name given to him was a good Jewish name . . . as were the holy Scriptures which he knew and read, the worship which he attended, the feasts which he celebrated and the prayers which he spoke."<sup>44</sup> "He worked among Jews, for Jews: his message was addressed to the whole Jewish people; the disciples, male and female, whom he gathered around him, and all his followers, were Jews from the Jewish community."<sup>45</sup> Rather a skeletal portrayal of the historically Jewish Jesus and all the more telling for what it does not understand about Jesus as in some way embedded in Judaism: his teaching-proclamations and most of his actions. Is this the historical Jesus "from below" rather than "from above" which Küng advocates that theologians must seek to recover? Is this an example of the way in which "Jesus must be seen as a Jew in his contemporary Jewish context (with historical detachment)"?<sup>46</sup> I think not.

What can we learn from this cautionary tale of one theologian's attempt to encounter the historically Jewish Jesus? Two things need to be stated at the outset. First, the kind of honest dialogue that is not afraid to be critical (and which Küng undertakes in this latest book on Judaism) needs to happen more often, even when that involves risking some major disagreements along the way.<sup>47</sup> Second, I do not assume that Küng is representative of all theologians in his approach to the historically Jewish Jesus, let alone Catholic theologians. Nevertheless, we can learn some things from his attempt to reconstruct the historically Jewish Jesus:

(1) The pitfalls into which he fell are pitfalls into which many historians (of both Jewish and Christian varieties) fall with some regularity. But his mistakes are complicated by a larger theological agenda and by his lack of awareness about the research on both Jesus and Judaism in the historical field. His mistakes are further complicated by his confusion between the historical Jesus, the reality of the actual Jesus of Nazareth, and his vague "Jesus from below," who seems to be neither of the first two but rather an "earthly Jesus" freely drawn from the canonical Gospels.

(2) Theologians may do better to adopt the second model I proposed earlier rather than the first. That is, rather than attempting to reconstruct the historically Jewish Jesus (as Küng did), to begin instead by surveying and critically selecting from the wealth of historically reconstructed "Jesuses" and then proceeding to develop one's theology from where the historians have left off. I propose this not

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 345.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 345-46.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 317.

<sup>47</sup>I very much respect the critically honest nature of his dialogue and the monumental task he has undertaken.

from a "hands off" perspective as a historian, but simply recognizing the monumental nature of the task and the demand of the theologian that he/she respond untheologically in historical reconstruction. Further, theologians need to be clear about why they are interested in the historically Jewish Jesus.

(3) Especially in approaching what is Jewish about the historical Jesus a few cautions are in order. First, we need to continually remind ourselves that in the first century we are talking about Judaisms and not some monolithic construct. Perhaps we also need to stop balancing the Jesus within these Judaisms with a Jesus unique from them and take these as two separate steps, framing the second less as a question about Jesus' uniqueness and more as a question about how the Jewish Jesus might ultimately lead to a Christianity separate from Judaism. Moreover, the task has been pursued in such a comprehensive and monumental way, that perhaps we should begin by undertaking a study of limited aspects of the historically Jewish Jesus—rather than attempting an overall portrait. Finally, attempts to compare Jesus to specific groups in first-century Judaisms has failed time and again. Perhaps it is time to try to understand his teachings and actions within the Judaisms of the first century in a broader way. One doesn't have to look very far to begin to notice first-century Jews who are critical of their fellow Jews and the way they interpret the Law, who challenge Temple practices, and whose teachings bear some similarity to Jesus. This does not ultimately detract from ways in which Jesus is unique, but it does allow one to begin to understand Jesus within Judaism and perhaps along with that a little more about first-century Judaisms.

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