

Preface

THEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL JESUS STUDIES COULD BE COMPARED TO estranged cousins who through some strange turn of events happen to arrive at the same family party unbeknownst that the other was going to be there. Having seen each other across the room, much effort is then expended on both sides ensuring that a sufficient number of other guests remain between them so as to prevent a direct confrontation. For their part, theologians tend to decry the various quests for the historical Jesus as misplaced adventures into history that result in nothing but irrelevancies for faith. On the other hand, historical Jesus scholars are quite critical of the theologian's practice of playing ostrich—willfully hiding their head in the sand, hoping that the flurry of historical activity around them will go away without disturbing their carefully laid and systematized nest.

This is nowhere more evident than in the understanding of what happened when Jesus hung on the cross. Theologians have tended to systematize the cross event into an overarching salvific narrative which has no need for, or any sense of, the historic particulars. Whereas the majority of historical Jesus scholarship understands the cross to have no real meaning at all, it is simply what happens when one goes up against the established might of Rome. For the former, the perilous task of peeling back the layers of history to try and discover the “real Jesus” yields nothing of the truth and can be safely ignored. For the latter, theological interpretations of Jesus' death are merely later accretions of the faith community which are stitched together by devoted followers in the hope of making sense of what happened to their dearly beloved, and recently departed, leader.

But the problem for both cousins is that the Jesus who is confessed as Christ is both a historical figure of history *and* the founder of the Christian faith. One can therefore not talk about Jesus in isolation from the other as if only one perspective had any claim to credibility. The Jesus who walked and talked during the first century of the Common Era is the Jesus that inspired and evoked the faith of Christian belief. And thus the Jesus of history is important to our understanding of the Christ of faith. Indeed, this is a tired old split that needs to be finally laid to rest and both cousins need to realise that they've been talking about the same person after all.

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This work is an attempt to bring the cousins to the same table to discuss the death of Christ in order that we might learn from one another and so that the Christian faith might be the richer for it. To be sure, the task is difficult—the cousins were estranged for a reason. But just because it is difficult does not make it any less worthwhile a task. In fact, we must try because if Jesus is really both God and Man as the Council of Chalcedon affirmed then the connection between the cousins has already been made in the person of Christ. History, of course, is not theology and theology is not history. But the theological confession that the eternal Word was made flesh, inevitably invites historical analysis. Bringing such analysis to bear on the intention that Jesus had for his death must in turn, impact the theologian's soteriological conceptions.

And herein lies the crucial contention of this book. Contemporary articulations of how and why Jesus' death functions to "save" humanity are going in considerably different directions to the Church's traditional teachings. Of course, different articulations are to be expected as each new community appropriates the salvation found in the cross event for themselves, but there must still be coherence with the Christian tradition if such re-articulations are to be considered faithful. This work argues that such coherence is found to the extent that new models and motifs are able to demonstrate their connection with the meaning with which Jesus imbued his death. Whether this work is ultimately successful in such a task will be left to the reader to decide. But if it contributes to the conversation and encourages others to add their voice then its goal would have already been achieved.

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