THE DEATH OF JESUS IN CONTEMPORARY
LIFE-OF-JESUS RESEARCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The death of Jesus is one of the best-attested events of antiquity. First, it is widely attested in all strands of the NT.¹ Second, it is attested in non-canonical Jewish and Roman sources.² On the basis of

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The principal Jewish source is the controversial Testimonium Flavianum (Josephus, Ant. 18.63-64). While it is probable that this passage has been “touched up” by well-meaning Christian scribes of the third century, it likewise seems highly probable that the reference to Jesus’ crucifixion under Pilate (“When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified” [18.64]) is both authentic and independent of Christian editing. For a detailed and largely persuasive discussion of this passage, see J. P. Meier, “Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal,” CBQ 52 (1990): 76-103; id., A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (3 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991-2001), 1:59-69, with notes on 70-88. L. H. Feldman, a specialist on Josephus, presents a similar view (Josephus XII [LCL 433; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965/2000], 48-51, with notes; and “Josephus,” ABD 3:990-91). For further discussion with similar conclusions, see also E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ (rev. and ed. G. Vermes et al.; 3 vols. in 4; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973-1987), 1:428-41; “Excursus II—Josephus on Jesus and James.” For a somewhat more guarded evaluation, see cursory remarks of S. Mason, Josephus and the New Testament (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 163-75.

In a fashion similar to the Testimonium, the Roman historian Tacitus also attests to Jesus’ crucifixion under “procurator” Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius (Ann. 15.44). For a pertinent discussion of the Tacitus testimony, see once again Meier, Marginal Jew, 1:89-91, with notes on 99-102. It should be noted that the reference to procurator rather than to “prefect” as attested in a Caesarean inscription (see D. R. Schwartz, “Pontius Pilate,” ABD 5:397, fig. PON.01) leads Meier to doubt that Tacitus is citing an official record here (Marginal Jew, 1:91; for more implications of the Caesarean inscription, see F. F. Bruce, New Testament History [1969; repr., Garden City: Doubleday-Galilee, 1980], 16-17 n. 19; Schürer, History, 1:358-60; D. R. Schwartz, “Pontius Pilate,” ABD 5:397-98; and J. F. Hall, “Procurator,” ABD 5:473-74). One should nevertheless note that Tacitus’s reference to Pontius Pilate is the only Roman
such attestation, almost all scholars of nearly all persuasions justifiably consider the historicity of Jesus' crucifixion to be beyond historical doubt. Joachim Jeremías contends that the death of Jesus "may be taken to be historically certain." E. P. Sanders lists Jesus' crucifixion as one of several facts about Jesus' career and its aftermath that can be known "beyond doubt." So foundational is Jesus' death that Scot McKnight presents it as a necessary conclusion to which historical reconstruction of Jesus' life and teaching must lead: "The Jesus constructed by historians must be a Jesus who is crucifiable."

The recognized factuality of Jesus' death, however, has led to very differing paths of pursuit. Traditional Christian theologians have customarily pursued the theological implications of Jesus' death. This pathway has led to detailed discussion about the nature and scope of Christ's atonement. Beginning with the "original reference we possess (cf. F. F. Bruce, Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 23).

In the inimitable words of the late G. B. Caird, "Apart from a few on the lunatic fringe who have denied that Jesus actually existed, nobody in our time has attempted to deny that Jesus died on a Roman cross" (New Testament Theology [ed. L. D. Hurst; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], 353). On the methodological defects of writers who deny Jesus' existence, see the comments of the classical historian M. Grant, Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels (1977; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1995), 199-200.


E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 10-11 (quote from p. 11). In the next line, Sanders introduces a list of eight "almost indisputable facts," in which he includes the crucifixion as number six. In his later, more popular work, The Historical Figure of Jesus (New York: Penguin, 1993), Sanders expands the working list of things known "almost beyond dispute" to fifteen, with the crucifixion listed as number eleven (see pp. 10-11). See also F. J. Matera, "Christ, Death of," ABD 1:923 ("The death of Jesus of Nazareth is generally accepted as historical fact").

Scot McKnight, A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9. While McKnight's book is devoted to Jesus' teachings in national context, he observes: "Before Jesus' teachings can be understood ... the historian must make sense of Jesus' death" (p. 8).

For an historical survey, see G. Aulén, Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement (trans. A. G. Hebert; 1931; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1969). Aulén's thesis is that the traditional account of the history of atonement theory is generally reduced to two general theories: "objective" or Anselmian and "subjective" or humanistic. He contends that atonement discussion should recognize also a third view: the "classic" idea. The latter can be summed up in the phrase Christus Victor. Aulén describes this "classic" view, which he provisionally entitles "dramatic" (p. 4), as follows: "Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself" (p. 4). Yet even Aulén's three categories could be expanded considerably. See M. J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 781-800; and R. Letham, The Work of Christ (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 159-75. For a more recent overview, see further D. G. Bloesch, Jesus Christ: Savior and Lord (Christian Foundations; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 144-74, esp. 148-58.
quest," on the other hand, prominent strands of critical Life-of-Jesus Research (Leben-Jesu-Forschung), attempting to distance itself from the "bias" of Christian theology, have generally pursued "purely historical" reason(s) as to why Jesus was put to death. If past discussion may be taken as instructive, however, it has not proven possible in practice to bracket theology when one is attempting a historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus. In no case has this been more clearly exemplified than in the approaches to the reason(s) for his death.

II. WHY JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED: AN ORIENTATION TO "THIRD" QUEST DISCUSSION

Since the story of Life-of-Jesus research (Leben-Jesu-Forschung) has been told and retold many times, it has, not surprisingly, taken on a stereotypical form divided, for convenience, into a series of heuristic phases. The initial phase is known by various descriptions: the "first quest," the "old quest," or even the "original quest." The second phase is customarily referred to as the "new quest." The most recent phase is now commonly called the "third quest," a phrase that appears to have been used initially by N. T.

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8 N. T. Wright astutely observes: "The 'Quest' began as an explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian, anti-dogmatic movement. Its initial agenda was not to find a Jesus upon whom Christian faith might be based, but to show that the faith of the church (as it was then conceived) could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth" (Jesus and the Victory of God [vol. 2 of Christian Origins and the Question of God; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 17; his emphasis).

9 Michael Grant prudently observes that an historian's neglect of religion leads to "even worse results" than a theologian's neglect of history. "For whatever [the historian] may or may not believe himself, history even in its most worldly branches . . . has been profoundly influenced throughout the ages by religion" (Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels, 1).

10 For a fuller survey of the character of the major quests, see J. P. Sweeney, "Jesus' Temple Action (Mark 11:15-18) in Recent Discussion: An Examination of Its Character, Meaning, and Role in Jesus' Death" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 2000; available through UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Bell & Howell, 2001), ch. 2.


12 The "new quest" owes its designation to J. M. Robinson's A New Quest of the Historical Jesus (SBT 25; Naperville, Ill.: A. R. Allenson, 1959), esp. ch. 1. This work was later reissued under the same title with an updated forward and four additional chapters of Robinson's essays (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
Wright in his update of S. Neill's *The Interpretation of the New Testament.*

Whereas the first quest was traced, thanks to Schweitzer, to Reimarus, and the new quest was traced, thanks to Robinson, to Käsemann, the third quest's origins and *raison d'être* are a matter of some debate. N. T. Wright traces the current quest back as early as 1965. Ben Witherington III, on the other hand, traces its beginnings to the early 1980s. More recently still, James D. G. Dunn traces the third quest to E. P. Sanders's *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) because, in his estimation, Sanders was able to place Jesus against the backdrop of a more accurate picture of Judaism. In terms of its *raison d'être,* Witherington puts this most recent quest's best face forward when he states that it is “fueled by some new archaeological and manuscript data, some new methodological refinements and some new enthusiasm that historical research did not need to lead to a dead end.”

N. T. Wright, by contrast, suggests that the third quest “offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement about method; [and]

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14 A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (trans. W. Montgomery from the first German edition, 1906; preface by F. D. Burkitt; introduction by J. M. Robinson; New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1968). Schweitzer writes of Reimarus in captivating, albeit greatly exaggerated, prose: “He had no predecessors; neither had he any disciples. His work is one of those supremely great works which pass and leave no trace, because they are before their time; to which later generations pay a just tribute of admiration, but owe no gratitude” (p. 26). Reimarus, of course, did have predecessors; see C. Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought 1778-1860* (SHT 1; Durham: Labyrinth, 1985), 3-6.


18 D. G. Dunn, “Can the Third Quest Hope to Succeed?” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 35. Sanders’s understanding of Second Temple Judaism, it should be noted, is undergoing continual critical reassessment. For a recent example, see D. A. Carson et al., *Justification and Variegated Nomism,* vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001).

19 Witherington, *Jesus Quest,* 12-13. One might compare M. J. Borg’s estimation that one can know as much about Jesus as any other figure in ancient history (see *Jesus: A New Vision* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 15, 21 n. 29), a statement with which Meier takes issue (*Marginal Jew,* 1:32 n. 4).
certainly no common set of results." Given such "a bewildering range of competing hypotheses," Paul W. Barnett recently issued against the third quest a contemporary variation of the type of criticism that was commonly leveled against proponents of the previous quests: "The Jesus of the 'third questers' . . . often looks remarkably like the scholars who write about him: post-modern, ideologically reformist and eminently reasonable."

As might be expected, third quest scholarship offers a "bewildering range" of opinions as to why Jesus was crucified. On the skeptical (neo-Bultmannian) end lie those who consider our sources to be so thin historically that all we can really know is that Jesus died. The question as to why he died is simply a matter of speculation. Three examples may suffice. In speaking of Jesus' death, Burton L. Mack opines:

One can only speculate about what happened. Jerusalem was, of course, the big city for Galileans during this period. Jesus must have gone there on some occasion, most probably during a pilgrimage season, was associated with a demonstration, and was killed.

John Dominic Crossan is forthright in claiming:

My proposal is that Jesus' first followers knew almost nothing whatsoever about the details of his crucifixion, death or burial. What we have now in those detailed passion accounts is not history remembered but prophecy historicized.

The extreme skepticism exemplified by such scholars as Mack and Crossan is further illustrated in David Seeley's extraordinary suggestion that Jesus' death was "probably just a mistake."

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20 Wright, "Quest," ABD 3:800.
21 P. W. Barnett, Jesus and the Logic of History (NSBT 3; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 17.
22 B. L. Mack, A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 88-89; cf. his further contentions that the passion narratives are simply fictive (e.g., pp. 55, 266 n. 11).
Works of a less skeptical nature tend to interpret Jesus' death as in some way related to the backdrop of the temple incident—an incident traditionally described as "the cleansing of the temple." Indeed, a number of scholars, past and present, have contended that this incident was a major factor that led to Jesus' death. It is E. P. Sanders, however, who makes this point pivotal to his whole reconstruction of the historical Jesus. In the next section we shall examine his argument that the temple incident was indeed the proverbial "final straw." In addition, we shall look at the proposals of five other scholars, some of whom interact in varying ways with Sander's own thesis: Richard Bauckham, Ben F. Meyer, Peter Stuhlmacher, Raymond E. Brown, and N. T. Wright.

A. E. P. Sanders's Thesis

E. P. Sanders treats the subject of the death of Jesus in ch. 11 of his *Jesus and Judaism.* He begins by affirming two facts: "Jesus was executed by the Romans as would-be 'king of the Jews,' and his disciples subsequently formed a messianic movement which was not based on the hope of military victory." He further contends that Jesus and his disciples were steadfastly "apolitical": that is, they had no "plan to liberate and restore Israel by defeating the Romans and establishing an autonomous government." Sanders finds no substance to the charge of blasphemy against Jesus in the gospels.

In conjunction with this, he further contends that it is unlikely that

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26 Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 294-318.

27 Ibid., 294.

28 Ibid., 296.

29 In *Jesus and Judaism* Sanders denies the authenticity of the Markan and Matthean accounts of the blasphemy charge in a series of seven arguments (see pp. 296-306, esp. 297-98). In a follow-up work, *Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), however, Sanders concedes that it was "conceivable, but not probable, that Jesus replied to the question, 'Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?' in such a way as to lead the high priest and others to think that he denigrated God by claiming a special relationship with him" (p. 67). Cf. also Sanders's, *Historical Figure,* 269-73.
SWEENEY: DEATH OF JESUS

the gospel writers had any more knowledge of Jesus’ “trial” than the barest outline. He proposes that it was “the combination of a physical action with a noticeable following which accounts for and led immediately to Jesus’ death.”

Sanders’s view of the temple event’s significance is set forth unequivocally:

Many factors—Jesus’ extraordinary self-claim; the gathering he attracted; the nervousness on the part of Jewish leaders not to give the Romans occasion for punishment of the people generally; the Romans’ own anxiety about prophets and about the crowds at feasts—doubtless help account for the fact that Jesus was crucified. But he was not crucified until after he had time to make a demonstration against the temple, and that appears to have been the last thing which he did (except for his last meal with his disciples) before he was executed. The gun may already have been cocked, but it was the temple demonstration which pulled the trigger.

This raises two further questions: “Why was Jesus crucified as king?” and “Can the precise role of the Jewish leaders be decided?” Sanders reaches a firm conclusion on the former:

Jesus taught about the kingdom; he was executed as a would-be king; and his disciples, after his death, expected him to return to establish his kingdom. These points are indisputable. . . . We should, I think, accept the obvious: Jesus taught his disciples that he himself would play a principal role in the kingdom.

In addition, Sanders is mildly disposed toward the historicity of “triumphal entry,” albeit as an event of restricted scope. He further sees Judas playing some role in Jesus’ betrayal. It is the second question (the precise role of the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ death), however, which occupies Sanders for the remainder of the chapter.

30 Ibid., 299-300.
31 Ibid., 304; his emphasis.
32 Ibid., 305; his emphasis. Compare the similar assessments in Sanders’s later works: Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 57-57; and Historical Figure, 254-62, 269-73. In the latter volume, Sanders again asserts: “The Temple action sealed his fate” (p. 265); on pp. 272-73, moreover, he includes Jesus’ entry and teaching about the kingdom as other factors that motivated the high priest to act against him.
33 Ibid., 305-6; his emphasis.
34 Ibid., 307; his emphasis.
35 Ibid., 306-8. Sanders appears to vacillate: “Perhaps the event took place but was a small occurrence which went unnoticed” (p. 306). “To conclude: the entry was probably deliberately managed by Jesus to symbolize the coming kingdom and his own role in it” (p. 308). In his later, more popular work, he guardedly expresses a more favorable view of the incident: “I incline to the view that it was Jesus himself who read the prophecy [of Zech 9:9] and decided to fulfill it: that here he implicitly declared himself to be ‘king’” (Historical Figure, 254; cf. 272-73).
36 Ibid., 309.
37 Ibid., 309-17.
While Sanders stresses the virtual absence of the Pharisees in the Passion Narratives, he nonetheless concedes, "The chief priests . . . play the prime role in all the Gospels." While Sanders considers this "very likely historically accurate," he nonetheless contends that the gospels present a shifting picture of Jesus' enemies.

B. The Thesis of Richard Bauckham

Richard Bauckham's chief agreement with Sanders concerns the role that the temple incident had in Jesus' death. Aside from that one point of agreement, he finds Sanders's argument for the destruction of the temple with a view to replacement with no connotations of judgment to be incoherent as an explanation of Jesus' death. Bauckham offers an alternative five-point reconstruction, beginning with Jesus' temple demonstration. First, as an attack on the financial arrangements for the sacrificial system, Jesus' action would have aroused the anger of the chief priests. His act would, second, have raised the question of Jesus' authority. Drawing on Richard A. Horsley, Bauckham notes, third, that in matters of Roman infringement, the high priests and priestly aristocracy feared popular insurrection more than desecration. Fourth, the charge of predicting the temple's destruction was one that the chief priests seized upon and of which they made the most in their charge against Jesus. Fifth, at the trial of Jesus his opponents fell back on the vaguer charge of messianic pretensions as suggested in the entry and temple demonstration.

C. The Thesis of Ben F. Meyer

In discussing the issues of why and how Jesus died, Ben F. Meyer finds the external or distal cause in the combination of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and temple action. He contends that "it is clear from the Synoptic tradition that the two events derive from one

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38Ibid., 310.
39Ibid (quote). Sanders sees confusion concerning Jewish self-government not only in the gospels but also in Josephus (pp. 312-17). Hence the "confusion in the Gospels about the events which immediately led to Jesus' execution may well point to the fact that there was no orderly procedure [with respect to 'trials' and judgments] which was noted and remembered" (p. 317). In any event, such "trials" need not have proceeded in the orderly fashion depicted in the Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin (ibid.). Cf. also Sanders's later Historical Figure, 269-73.
41Ibid., 86-87. On Sanders's attempt to bypass the theme of judgment in Jesus' temple action, see Jesus and Judaism, 71-75.
43These five points are set forth in Bauckham's "Jesus' Demonstration," 88-89.
SWEENEY: DEATH OF JESUS
matrix and were originally elements of a single symbolic structure." As a symbolic act, then,

the cleansing belonged to the same royal or messianic thematic as the entry. Entry and cleansing together signaled the arrival of the time of fulfillment. The epiphany of the Son of David meant that "this age" had been overtaken by "the age to come." His visitation of the temple signified the end of the historic cult and the inauguration of eschatological cult. This complex symbolic act led naturally to a question about Jesus' authority (Mark 11:27-33 parr.), which the gospel of John (John 2:18-20) indicates was immediately followed by the demand of the Jews for a sign to justify Jesus' pretension to superior authority. Meyer suggests that if such was the immediate demand of the authorities, it would clearly indicate that they had rightly interpreted Jesus' act as "prophetic" and perhaps as symbolic in intent. Jesus, for his part, refused to meet the demand except by the indirectness of a riddle. While Meyer concedes that the original wording of the riddle is irrecoverable, he notes that the subtraction of Markan redactional touches of Mark 14:58 yielded, "I will destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will build another." Meyer sees the oracle of Nathan lying behind this pronouncement (2 Sam 7:13-14) and Zecharian imagery lying behind Jesus' actions (e.g., Zech 9:9 [entry]; 14:21 [cleansing]; and 6:12 [rebuilding]). So reconstructed, he suggests: "The whole event [that is, Jesus' entry and temple 'cleansing' considered together] triggered the conspiracy that led to Jesus' death (Mark 11:18 = Luke 19:47b-48)." Meyer, unlike Sanders, but like Bauckham, further believes that Jesus did protest against priestly corruption.

In addition to this external or distal cause, however, Meyer also sees a proximal cause of Jesus' death in his own conception of mission vis-à-vis Israel's rejection of it. While Meyer notes that Jesus' offer of salvation was free, he also notes that a positive response to it

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44B. F. Meyer, "Jesus Christ," ABD 3:790. Meyer's comment is further clarified if one recalls that in his earlier work, Aims of Jesus (London: SCM, 1979), he contended: "Originally, the entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11.1-10 parr.), the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11.15-19 parr.) and the question about authority (Mark 11.27-33 parr.) constituted a single narrative unit and reflected a single continuous event" (p. 168, with justification provided on p. 298 n. 132).
45Meyer, "Jesus Christ," 790.
46Ibid., 791.
47Ibid.
49Meyer noted, "It would be a mistake to infer from the symbolic character of the cleansing that Jesus did not intend a real critique of temple practice" (ibid.).
was requisite, not optional. Since, through rejection, the good news of the reign of God risked turning into a condemnation, Meyer poses two questions that confronted Jesus: "Was the herald of Israel's restoration to become the instrument of its ruin? [and] What could be done for the refuser in this situation of refusal?" Meyer suggests that Jesus found the answer to both questions in the kind of death he was to undergo:

Jesus found the solution in his own expiatory death. So far from responding to some unintelligible demand incompatible with grace, his expiatory death was an initiative of pure grace, meant above all for Israel. . . Having willed his death for the forgiveness of the sins of Israel and the sins of the world, he took the decisive step toward this destiny when, in response to the authoritative question of the high priest, he explicitly affirmed in public, for the first and only time, his claim to be the messianic Son of God.50

D. The Thesis of Peter Stuhlmacher

Peter Stuhlmacher of the University of Tübingen suggests a complex of six reasons that led to Jesus' condemnation, the culminating factor of which was the temple incident.51 First was his provocative healing on the Sabbath that offends Pharisees (Mark 2:28; 3:1ff.). Second, Jesus associated with notorious sinners ("tax collectors and sinners"). His dining with them, moreover, carried messianic implications (Mark 2:15ff. with 1 En. 62:14). Third, Jesus set himself in opposition to God's law by deliberately juxtaposing his own teaching with the Sinai revelation so as to sound a contrast between the two (Matt 5:21-23, 33-34). Fourth was Jesus' teaching regarding wealth (Mark 10:17-22; Luke 6:24-25; cf. Mark 10:25) that offended the numerous proprietors and wealthy families of Palestine. Fifth, one finds in Mark 12:17, Jesus' provocative statement about rendering to Caesar, which was offensive to insurrectionists and to the freedom party of the Zealots. The sixth was Jesus' provocative symbolic action in the temple followed by scriptural quotations that proved to be not only "an incredible provocation" but also called into question "the nature of sacrifices as a whole."52

As Stuhlmacher explains,

By means of this temple cleansing Jesus endangers the entire order of the temple cult, which God established in the Torah. Henceforth the powerful priesthood and the Sadducean nobility of Jerusalem,

50Ibid., 792.
51The following summary is based on Stuhlmacher's Jesus of Nazareth—Christ of Faith (trans. S. Schatzmann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 42-47. He sets these points forth in the form of six "scenes."
52Ibid., 46.
heavily involved financially in the temple, join as Jesus' mortal enemies.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{E. The Thesis of Raymond E. Brown}

In his detailed two-volume study on \textit{The Death of the Messiah}, Raymond E. Brown also sees a likely historical connection between Jesus' death and his action/attitude toward the temple. In a discussion of historicity at the beginning of the work, Brown suggests that Mark/Matthew, John, and Acts relate Jesus' death to his threatening attitude to the temple. This, he suggests, is "coherent with solid historical evidence that in the period before A.D. 70 disputes over the Temple constituted the most frequent single factor in religious violence among Jews."\textsuperscript{54}

It is in his treatment of the Sanhedrin proceedings, however, where Brown devotes the most attention to this subject.\textsuperscript{55} While he recognizes that there are unresolved historical questions regarding the temple incident, Brown seems clearly to favor the general historicity of Jesus' temple action.\textsuperscript{56} He oscillates between the ideas of cleansing versus destruction, preferring the designation of the former while favoring the latter as best representing Jesus' intention.\textsuperscript{57} Given the fact that the temple was the key institution of civic and religious life, Brown further notes that it is historically plausible that any action or words against it could prompt a deadly response.\textsuperscript{58} He further acknowledges that this viewpoint must be balanced by caution, however, noting that Josephus records no parallel example of religious enthusiasm that brought about Roman intervention during the prefecture of A.D. 6-30/33.\textsuperscript{59}

With customary caution Brown prefers

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\texttt{a modest phrasing of what at its core has high historical probability: Something done and/or said by Jesus prognostic of the Temple/sanctuary was at least a partial cause of the Sanhedrin's decision that led to his death.}\textsuperscript{60}
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\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54}Brown, \textit{Death of the Messiah}, 18.
\textsuperscript{55}Particularly ibid., 455-60 and 539-41.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 455 and n. 40. The problems he mentioned are the "inner-NT disagreements" including the differences in the placement of the action (Johannine vs. Synoptic), and details regarding commercial transactions presupposed in the narratives (ibid., n. 40).
\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 455-56 and n. 39. Indeed, on pp. 456-57, Brown postulates: "The evangelists saw no contradiction between an action intended to purify the temple and an apocalyptic threat of destroying the sanctuary."
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 458-59. This point is developed on pp. 539-41.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 459; cf. 539-41.
\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 459-60. This was the tentative conclusion of §20 (pp. 428-60) on the Sanhedrin's proceedings regarding Jesus' statement against the temple (Mark 14:55-59 parr.).
\end{footnotes}
N. T. Wright, like Sanders, offers an elaborate reconstruction of the place of the temple incident in the death of Jesus. Wright notes that almost all contemporary scholars agree on two points: (1) Jesus performed a dramatic action in the temple, and (2) this action was one of the main reasons for his execution. Like Ben F. Meyer, moreover, Wright views the temple incident in close proximity to Jesus' dramatic entry to Jerusalem. In his estimation, the latter was "clearly messianic." As for Jesus' death, Wright suggests that it must be approached from three perspectives: Roman, Jewish, and Jesus' own intention. From the Roman perspective, Jesus was crucified as a rebel against Rome. Pilate was caught in a game of politics "between his desire not to do what his Jewish subjects want—he intends to snub them if he can—and his fear of what Tiberius will think of him if news leaks out." The gospel accounts suggest four things:

First, Pilate recognized that Jesus was not the ordinary sort of revolutionary. Second, Pilate . . . realized that the Jewish leaders had their own reasons for wanting Jesus executed. . . . Third, this gave him the opening to do what he would normally expect to do, which was to refuse their request. . . . He failed, fourth, because it was pointed out to him in no uncertain terms that if he did not execute a would-be rebel king he would stand accused, himself, of disloyalty to Caesar.

The reason for Jesus' death, as viewed from the perspective of the Jewish leadership, evokes a fivefold answer. He was sent to the governor on a capital charge for the following reasons:

(i) because many . . . saw him as a "false prophet, leading Israel astray";
(ii) because . . . they saw his Temple-action as a blow against the central symbol not only of national life but also of YHWH's presence with his people;
(iii) because . . . he saw himself in some sense as Messiah;
(iv) because . . . they saw him as a dangerous political nuisance;
(v) because . . . he not only . . . pleaded guilty to the above charges, but also did so in such a way as

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61Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 405.
62Ibid., 491.
63Ibid., 544.
64Ibid., 545, where Wright compares Pilate's actions in the gospels and his actions in the Gaius incident (Philo, Legat. 299-305).
65Ibid., 546-47.
to place himself, blasphemously, alongside the God of Israel.\footnote{Sweeney, 551-52.}

This leads to the third element: Jesus' own intentions. Here Wright's reconstruction is wide-ranging, resting on four main pillars. The first is the symbol of the Last Supper. Through this dramatic symbol Jesus intended to say "that he was shortly to die, and that his death was to be seen within the context of the larger story of YHWH's redemption of Israel."\footnote{Ibid., 562. Further: "More specifically, he intended to say that his death was to be seen as the central and climatic movement towards which that story had been moving, and for which the events of the exodus were the crucial and determining backdrop" (pp. 562-63).} The second pillar rests on Jesus' sayings concerning his own death\footnote{This section (pp. 565-74) includes a large number of pericopae, including the rejected son (Mark 12:1-12 parr.); the great commandment (Mark 12:28-34 par.); anointing for burial (Mark 14:3-9 parr.); the green tree and the dry (Luke 23:27-31); the hen and the chickens (Matt 23:37-39/Luke 13:34-34); and the baptism and the cup (Luke 12:49-50, and Mark 10:38-40 par.; cf. Mark 14:36 parr.).} and predictions concerning his passion.\footnote{Ibid., 574-76.} Third, Jesus' view of eschatological redemption indicates that he was challenging existing interpretations of the tradition precisely by reaffirming the deep-rooted Jewish tradition, on the one hand, and redefining it around his own vision of the kingdom, on the other.\footnote{See ibid., 591-92. Wright views the controlling story of Israel's tradition, as viewed by first century Jews, to be the twin themes of exile and restoration. The twin sub-plots of this story are the messianic woes, on the one hand, and specific or individual suffering, on the other (see ibid., 576-84).} The fourth pillar of this complex was Jesus' conscious intention to bring about a divinely wrought victory over radical evil by means of his own death on the cross.\footnote{Ibid., 592-611. "Unlike his actions in the Temple and the upper room, the cross was a symbol not of praxis but of passivity, not of action but of passion. It was to become the symbol of victory, but not of the victory of Caesar, nor of those who would oppose Caesar with Caesar's methods. It was to become the symbol, because it would be the means, of the victory of God" (p. 610).}

III. THE DEATH OF JESUS: A SUMMARY OF CONTEMPORARY CONTRIBUTIONS AND AN OUTLINE OF FUTURE PROSPECTS

In contrast to much of the older discussion (old quest and new quest) and the skeptical (neo-Bultmannian) strand of third quest discussion mentioned above, prominent scholars identified with the third quest typically recognize that the question as to why Jesus was crucified must be answered in broad terms. Wright recognizes that this question must be approached from three perspectives: Roman, Jewish, and Jesus' own intention. While Sanders views the temple incident as the pivotal event that "triggered" Jesus' death, each of
the other scholars chronicled above recognize that a broader answer is needed than the temple incident alone. While Bauckham, Meyer, Stuhlmacher, Brown, and Wright all recognize that the temple incident is a pivotal event that helped to precipitate Jesus' death, they do not grant it the determinative force that Sanders does.

Bauckham, and particularly Meyer, both include Jesus' entry along with the temple incident as actions that precipitated his death. Stuhlmacher and Wright further recognize that there are a number of other important factors that must be included. Hence, in addition to Jesus' temple action, Stuhlmacher includes Jesus' healings, his dining with sinners, his teaching in opposition to the Law, his teaching against the wealthy, and his statement about rendering Caesar his due. Wright includes the Last Supper, Jesus' sayings concerning his own death and predictions concerning his passion, his challenges to current Jewish traditions with respect to eschatological redemption and the kingdom, and, last, Jesus' intention to bring about a divinely-wrought victory through his death on the cross, a form of victory very unlike the modes of victory pursued by others in early first century Palestine.

It should be recognized that there are some valuable avenues of pursuit in the current third quest discussion and that such discussion opens up a number of vistas for the contribution of evangelical scholars who typically have a high view of the gospels as historical and theological sources. While a prominent segment of contemporary discussion is correct to view Jesus' death in broad terms, there are some aspects of gospel data that still do not receive the focused discussion that they deserve.

By way of partial engagement with and partial augmentation to the current discussion, in what remains of this essay we shall sketch briefly some of the principal strands of gospel data that collectively need to be taken into consideration if contemporary scholarship is to do full justice to the way in which the gospels present Jesus' own view of his impending death. The six representative strands suggested, the direction that they appear to point, and a selective sampling of quality bibliographic resources for further study, are as follows.

First are Jesus' miracles. Jesus' miracles have not always been afforded the attention they deserve. This is at least partially the result of the metaphysical assumptions that stand behind the skepticism with which miracles are viewed, particularly in the West. Yet, as John P. Meier concludes in his thorough survey of the gospel miracles,
Any historian who seeks to portray the historical Jesus without giving due weight to his fame as a miracle-worker is not delineating this strange and complex Jew, but rather a domesticated Jesus reminiscent of the bland moralist created by Thomas Jefferson.  

A number of important studies have once again revisited this crucial area of Jesus' ministry. In his comprehensive study of the subject, Graham H. Twelftree suggests that the most obvious of the common threads in all the gospels with respect to this topic is that the Gospel writers are all convinced that the miracles of Jesus carry in them the signature or fingerprints of the One who performed them. That is, the miracles of Jesus reveal his identity as God himself at work; indeed, God is encountered in the miracles. Thus the miraculous activity of Jesus is the eschatological work and message of salvation.

This question is important to our discussion because the gospel writers clearly portray Jesus' miracles as a source of conflict between himself and the religious authorities. At least two strands of gospel data indicate that it is this conflict that led to plots against him.

recited *sotto voce*: 'No modern educated person can accept the possibility of miracles'" (Marginal Jew, 2:520).


Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 343 (italics his).


While Meier is undecided about the historicity of the episode preserved in Mark 3:1-6 (Marginal Jew, 2:683-84), Twelftree expresses no reservations with regard to historicity. He is nevertheless doubtful about whether 3:6 implies a threat to his life, for he takes ἀπολέσωσιν (from ἀπολέωμι) in the weaker sense ("ruin") and believes that it indicates a plot to bring Jesus down *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 295. The later use of the verb in Mark 11:18 (πῶς αὐτὸν ἀπολέσωσιν), particularly in the light of 14:1 (πῶς αὐτὸν . . . ἀποκτένωσιν), however, may imply a stronger sense here in Mark 3:6 (cf. R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 152). And while R. T. France suggests that συμβούλιον ἔδιδον in Mark 3:6 implies no formalized strategy on the antagonists' part at this point in the narrative (*The Gospel of Mark* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 152), he does not address directly the semantic force of ἀπολέσωσιν in 3:6.
Second are Jesus' passion and resurrection predictions (Mark 8:31-33 [parr. Matt 16:21-24; Luke 9:21-22]; Mark 9:30-31 [parr Matt 17:22-23; Luke 9:43b-45, a prediction of betrayal], and Mark 10:32-34 [parr. Matt 19:17-19, Luke 18:31-32]) While these passion and resurrection predictions have long been viewed with suspicion as secondary creations of the early church,\textsuperscript{78} this explanation is not persuasive.\textsuperscript{79} Rather, on analogy to passages like Mark 9:12, 14, 21, 49, the necessity that Jesus expresses (δεί τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πολλὰ παθεῖν καὶ άποδοκιμασθῆναι . . . καὶ ἄποκτανθῆναι καὶ μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἀναστήσαι [Mark 8:31]) suggests a consciousness of mission and purpose shaped by the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{80} The content of these predictions imply that Jesus viewed his death as something toward which the whole tenor of his life and ministry was directed,\textsuperscript{81} and something

\textsuperscript{78}This attitude is exemplified in R Bultmann's prefatory comments on these passages "I shall not spend much time on the predictions of the passion and resurrection, which have long been recognized as secondary constructions of the Church" (The History of the Synoptic Tradition [trans J Marsh, Oxford Blackwell, 1963, reprint, Peabody Hendrickson, nd], 152)


\textsuperscript{80}France suggests, "It is in the divine purpose revealed in Scripture, rather than in the inevitabilities of Palestinian politics, that Jesus finds the pattern for what was to happen to him" (Mark, 334) Of course, the divine purpose revealed in the Scriptures in which Jesus found the pattern for what was to happen to him did lead him into inevitable conflict with Palestinian politics (understood broadly)

\textsuperscript{81}In his provocative survey of earlier Leben-Jesu-Forschung, Schweitzer suggested that in classifying the lives of Jesus, one might take it as "a principle of division" whether such lives "make Jesus go to Jerusalem to work or to die" (Quest of the Historical Jesus, 391 n 1) Schweitzer himself was unambiguously committed to the latter position ("Towards Passover Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, solely in order to die there" [ibid., 391]) This same principle of division is still largely operative in contemporary study, even if scholars typically prefer to word things more moderately than Schweitzer did. Hence C F D Moule, followed partially by Sanders, suggests that Jesus "did not seek death, he did not go up to Jerusalem in order to die, but he did pursue, with inflexible devotion, a way of truth that inevitably led him to death, and he did not seek to escape" (The Origin of Christology [Cambridge Cambridge
when accomplished, which would culminate in divine vindication in the form of resurrection.

Third is the ransom logion of Mark 10:45 (par. Matt 20:28): "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many [δούναι την ψυχήν αύτοϋ λύτρον αντι πολλών]." This logion serves as the summary illustration in a pericope in which James and John request seating positions next to Jesus in the coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-45; cf. par. Matt 20:20-28, where it is their mother who makes the request). Three central questions surround this logion: (1) the unity of the pericope of which the logion is a part; (2) the authenticity of the ransom logion itself; and (3) the scriptural background presupposed in the logion. While the unity of the pericope has frequently been questioned, some prominent recent scholars plausibly uphold its unity. The authenticity of this logion has also been ably defended. What has been further controversial, moreover, is the assumed background of the logion. While prominent scholars customarily interpret this logion in the broader light of the Isaianic Servant of Yahweh (Isa 52:13-53:12), M. D. Hooker and C. K. Barrett pose strong challenges to Isaianic dependence. Despite their challenges, however, a
number of prominent scholars remain convinced that the Suffering Servant oracle of Isaiah (Isa 52:13-53:12, esp. 53:10-12) is a fruitful source for explaining Jesus' intended reference. And while Jesus' language may not be limited to the Suffering Servant oracle alone, its influence in Mark 10:45 is surely difficult to deny. Hence, whether one limits the background of the logion to the Isaianic Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12) alone, or includes a broader range of passages along with it (cf. n. 89), Mark 10:45 provides important insight into Jesus' understanding of his impending death.

Fourth, the complex of Jesus' triumphal entry, temple incident, the debate with the religious leaders over his authority, and his follow-up parable of the tenants (Mark 11:1-12:11 parr.) provide varying degrees of insight into Jesus' messianic self-consciousness as he confronted the religious authorities of Jerusalem. Jesus' carefully orchestrated actions in the dramatic entry into Jerusalem indicate a


89While Stuhlmacher includes Isa 53:10-12 in the background of Mark 10:45, he sees Isa 43:3-4 as being more determinative, suggesting that “Isa. 43:3-4 delivers the primary accent” (“Vicariously Giving His Life for Many,” esp. 17, 20-23 [quote p. 23]; cf. id., Jesus of Nazareth, 49-52, 56 n. 23). While Gundry expresses doubts concerning the influence of Isa 43:3-4 (Mark, 592), Evans suggests, “It is not necessary to view Isa 53 and Isa 43 as competing alternatives; rather they may be viewed as prophetic sources out of which Jesus' mission, message, and self-understanding could be formed” (Mark, 123). This still raises the question, however, as to which passage is more prominent, and it would seem that the priority of weight that Stuhlmacher gives to Isa 43:3-4 may be better shifted to Isa 53:10-12. On the possible role of Daniel 7, moreover, see further Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3:97, 99; and Evans, Mark, 123-24.

90Beasley-Murray observes: “One might suitably contend that it would be difficult to find any passage in Jewish literature closer in concept to Mark 10:45b than Isaiah 53:10-12” (Jesus and the Kingdom of God, 282).

91Stuhlmacher contends: “New Testament scholarship doesn't need to be at a loss to answer the important question of how Jesus understood his mission and death. It can answer that Jesus ministered, suffered, and endured an expiatory death as the messianic reconciler. But the messianic reconciler is the embodiment of the love of God that elects and redeems the lost, as Deutero-Isaiah testifies with special urgency and promise” (“Vicariously Giving His Life for Many,” 25-26). Cf. France: “Mark's story must be seen in the light of this one purpose, δούνα την ψυχήν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ παλιόν” (Mark, 421).
consciousness on his part of being Israel’s eschatological king, as his symbolic acting out of the Zecharian prophecy (Zech 9:9-10) indicates.\(^{92}\) His clearing of the temple and subsequent teaching drawn from Isa 56:7 and Jeremiah 7 imply a consciousness of authority on his part to pronounce judgment on the disobedient temple stewards (as his quotation of Jeremiah 7 implies).\(^{93}\) Hence, his clearing of the temple was intended to serve as a proleptic symbol of this coming judgment.\(^{94}\) This complex of symbolic actions (entry and temple incident) leads naturally to a debate over his authority (Mark 11:27-33; par. Matt 21:23-27)\(^{95}\) and provides the context for Jesus’ subsequent pronouncement of judgment on the religious leaders in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-11 par. Matt 21:33-46).\(^{96}\) This

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96Evans notes: “Contextually, the parable of 12:1-12 answers the question put to Jesus in 11:28: ‘By what authority do you do these things?’ The answer is implicit but unmistakable: Jesus acts under God’s authority. God has given this authority to Jesus because he is his Son (1:11; 9:7), the ‘son of man’ who has approached God’s throne and received authority from God” (Mark, 231). For a selection of important work on this parable, see K. Snodgrass, The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (WUNT 27; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983); C. L. Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 247-51; Gundry, Mark, 659-64, 682-91; Hagner, Matthew, 2.615-24; G. J. Brooke, “4Q501 1 and the Use of Scripture in the Parable of the Vineyard,” DSD 2 (1995): 268-94; Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 497-501; Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3:174-92; Watts, Isaiah’s New Exodus, 339-48; A. J. Hultgren, The Parables of
pronouncement, Mark 12:12 relates, precipitated a plot against Jesus' life by these same leaders.97

Fifth, Jesus' words of institution at the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-25//Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20//1 Cor 11:23-25) further give insight into how he viewed his impending death.98 There are many debated issues concerning these texts, including the original form of the tradition and the context in which Jesus uttered it.99 Jesus' language, particularly with regard to the cup, indicates that he viewed his impending death as the means of initiating the new covenant predicted by Jer 31:31-34.100 It further contains allusions to

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98While W. Hackenberg suggests on the basis of Isa 5:1-7 that the tenants of the parable represent all Israel or Israel as a whole ("γενογίως," EDNT 1:246), this is far less plausible in context than a reference to the Jewish leaders (cf. Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, 359).


100That the words pronounced over the cup in reference to "the covenant" (Mark 14:24; par. Matthew 26:28]) or "the new covenant" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), in addition to being a reference to Exod 24:8, is further an allusion to the divine promise of a new covenant in Jer 31[= LXX 38]:31-34 is frequently recognized (e.g., Jeremías, Eucharistic Words, 194-95; Marshall, Last Supper, 91-93; Moo, Use of the Old Testament, 306; Stein, "Last Supper," 446; Hagner, Matthew, 2:773; Evans, Mark, 388, 392; and France, Mark, 570). Davies and Allison, by contrast, consider a reference to Jer 31:31 in

Sixth, Jesus' acknowledgment to be the Son of the Blessed One and the Son of Man of Daniel 7 (Mark 14:61b-62; Matt 26:63b-64), coupled with the resultant action of the Sanhédrin in declaring him guilty of blasphemy (Mark 14:63-64 par. Matt 26:65-66), indicate that Jesus' identity—that is, who he claimed to be—was a central factor in his death. As Darrell L. Bock himself concludes in his detailed study of the blasphemy charge:

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership two millennia ago was grounded in fundamentally different perceptions of who he was and the authority he possessed for what he was doing. Either he was a blasphemer or the agent of God destined for a unique exultation/vindication.

It is precisely these same two issues that Bock identifies—Jesus' identity and authority—that consistently come to the fore in six strands of gospel data sketched above. They thus provide the principal "raw material" by which a more comprehensive answer can be given to the question of why Jesus died. A more important question can hardly be asked or answered.

Matthew and Mark to be uncertain. They nonetheless hold out the possibility of a reference to it, particularly given the popularity of this text in early Christian circles (Matthew, 3:473-74).


Bock, Blasphemy and Exaltation, 236.
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