

# Epilogue

## *The Jewish Gospel*

JEWS NOT INFREQUENTLY ARGUE THAT Christianity appropriated the Hebrew Bible and turned it to its own non-Jewish purposes, thus distorting its meanings. This book challenges this claim in two ways. On one hand, the implication of my argument is that Christianity hijacked not only the Old Testament but the New Testament as well by turning that thoroughly Jewish text away from its cultural origins among the Jewish communities of Palestine in the first century and making it an attack on the traditions of the Jews, traditions that, I maintain, it sought to uphold and not destroy, traditions that give the narrative its richest literary and hermeneutical context. On the other hand, this book challenges the notion that the New Testament itself is an appropriation, or—even better—a misappropriation of the Old. If the interpretations offered here hold water, then the New Testament is much more deeply

embedded within Second Temple Jewish life and thought than many have imagined, even—and this I emphasize again—in the very moments that we take to be most characteristically Christian as opposed to Jewish: the notion of a dual godhead with a Father and a Son, the notion of a Redeemer who himself will be both God and man, and the notion that this Redeemer would suffer and die as part of the salvational process. At least some of these ideas, the Father/Son godhead and the suffering savior, have deep roots in the Hebrew Bible as well and may be among some of the most ancient ideas about God and the world that the Israelite people ever held.

Many, perhaps even most, New Testament scholars today argue that the most striking parts of the Jesus story as told in the Gospels—that he was the Messiah, the Son of Man; that he died and was resurrected; and that he is to be worshipped as God—all stem *ex eventu* (after the fact) from the earliest followers of Jesus, who developed these ideas in the wake of his death and their experiences of his resurrection appearances. Thus, one of the finest and most respected (by me, as well, of course) scholars of New Testament today, Adela Yarbro Collins, writes openly, “Most New Testament scholars would still agree with Bultmann’s judgment that the creation of the ‘idea of a suffering, dying, rising Messiah or Son of Man’ was ‘not done by Jesus himself but by’ his followers ‘*ex eventu*,’ that is, after the fact of the crucifixion and the

experiences of Jesus as risen.”<sup>1</sup> In this, she is, as she says, entirely representative of the dominant scholarly tradition today about the Son of Man and the exalted status of Jesus, the Christ. As it was recently put to me by an orthodox Jewish scholar of rabbinics, the Gospel story is a complete novelty engendered by the remarkable life and death of the man Jesus of Nazareth.

The historian in me rebels at such an account. Taking even the remarkable nature of Jesus—and I have no doubt that he *was* a remarkable person—as the historical explanation for a world-shifting revision of beliefs and practices seems to me hardly plausible. It may have been necessary that Jesus was so extraordinary for such a compelling narrative of divine being and function to have developed, but it was hardly sufficient. Even more so, the notion that some kind of experience of the risen Christ preceded and gave rise to the idea that he would rise seems to me so unlikely as to be incredible. Perhaps his followers saw him arisen, but surely this must be because they had a narrative that led them to expect such appearances, and not that the appearances gave rise to the narrative.\* An alternative account such as I have given here seems much more likely to make historical sense. A people had been for centuries

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\* Let me make myself clear here: I am not denying the validity of the religious Christian view of matters. That is surely a matter of faith, not scholarship. I am denying it as a historical, scholarly, critical explanation.

talking about, thinking about, and reading about a new king, a son of David, who would come to redeem them from Seleucid and then Roman oppression, and they had come to think of that king as a second, younger, divine figure on the basis of the Book of Daniel's reflection of that very ancient tradition. So they were persuaded to see in Jesus of Nazareth the one whom they had expected to come: the Messiah, the Christ. A fairly ordinary story of a prophet, a magician, a charismatic teacher is thoroughly transformed when that teacher understands himself—or is understood by others—as this coming one. Details of his life, his prerogatives, his powers, and even his suffering and death before triumph are all developed out of close midrashic reading of the biblical materials and fulfilled in his life and death. The exaltation and resurrection experiences of his followers are a product of the narrative, not a cause of it. This is not to deny any creativity on the part of Jesus or his early or later followers, but only to suggest strongly that such creativity is most richly and compellingly read within the Jewish textual and intertextual world, the echo chamber of a Jewish soundscape of the first century.