



Los Angeles Times | California | Local

You are here: LAT Home > Articles > 2000 > December > 23 > California | Local

A Perplexing Reinterpretation of Jesus' Life

By Zachary Karabell
December 23, 2000

"Who do you say that I am?" Christ asked his followers in the Gospels, and scholars have been struggling to answer that question ever since. Few scholars or theologians, however, have dealt with an obvious fact: Jesus was Jewish. But in recent years, thanks to breakthroughs in archeology as well as in our understanding of Aramaic and Hellenistic Greek, the Jewishness of Jesus has been excavated.

And that is why, early in "Rabbi Jesus," Bruce Chilton takes the Christian claim to the Nativity scene, found in miniature at the foot of so many Christmas trees this month, and reminds readers of what happened several days later: Jesus was circumcised. And although Mary, Jesus' mother, is universally thought to have been a virgin—and the Immaculate Conception is a hallmark of the creed of the Catholic Church—Chilton notes that the Greek word that has been rendered as "virgin" actually meant "maiden," and while a Jewish maiden from Galilee might have been a virgin, there is no reason to assume that she would have been.

Chilton, however, is not some scholarly firebrand. He is an Anglican priest who has made a lifelong study of ancient Near East languages and culture. He opens his book with a moving description of how he came to the ministry one day as a young man in church, and he says that his research is not meant to undermine the mystery of Christianity but to remove the veils of illusion. By making Jesus the only one who sits on the right hand of God, by claiming that he is the only son of God rather than an exemplary son of God who is a beacon for the world, "many theologians have denied heaven to others."

Bracketed by noble intentions, "Rabbi Jesus" is perplexing and disturbing, and not always in the way that Chilton intends. Chilton places Jesus' actions in the context of Judaism in general, and Galilean Judaism in particular. Among his insights into the life of Christ, Chilton asserts that Jesus was a student of John the Baptist, that his own sense of mission evolved gradually, that his often enigmatic sayings formed a personal cabala that hid subversive meaning from the authorities and that the resurrected Jesus was a vision, not a corporeal fact.

Like other scholars, Chilton demonstrates how central the notion of purity was, and how Jesus rejected then-common understandings of purity. Jews tended to see purity as an external issue, in terms of dirt, blood and uncleanness. Jesus claimed that purity is an inner state, and that purity of heart signified outward purity as well. That was what allowed him to embrace "lepers" (not really lepers at all, says Chilton, but rather someone covered with scabs) and women of questionable reputation.

Chilton creates a chronology of Jesus that is astounding in its specificity. He charts Jesus' life almost year by year, from his teenage days as a mangy, ill-fed follower of John the Baptist to his final years, when Chilton argues that he blossomed into a full-blown radical miracle worker who was determined to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, restore the Temple to purity, and purge the Romans and the corrupt priests from its midst.

Chilton debunks and reinterprets. He is part of a wide circle of scholars involved in the Jesus Seminar, which has led to significant changes in the way Jesus is understood. But the people involved in this endeavor hardly speak with one mind. Quite the contrary. Chilton, however, writes as if what he is saying is perfectly obvious. That is typical of his coterie. In a noisy, contentious field, benefit obviously accrues to the person who can shout loudest and act most sure. In refuting the notion that Jesus meant the Eucharist literally, Chilton writes, "The Eucharist's Jewish meaning came to me only in early 1990. A new thought struck me, simple but visceral: When Jesus spoke of his 'blood' and 'flesh,' he did not refer to himself personally... . He meant his meal had become a sacrifice. When Israelites shared wine and bread in celebration of their own purity... . God delighted in that more than in the blood and flesh on the altar. In an instant, all I learned from the church of my youth was turned upside down."

This is a provocative alternative, but Chilton makes it seem like the unexpurgated truth. Chilton is a fluid writer of great erudition who may be on the mark with his insights. But it's hard to trust someone who seems overly sure about unsure things. Recent discoveries aside, there is still little that anyone can say for certain about the life of Jesus. By not embracing that reality explicitly, Chilton leaves us with the nagging doubt that he doesn't recognize it, that he has simply replaced one questionable orthodoxy (traditional notions of Jesus) with another (his notions of Jesus). That undermines his interpretation. In dealing with the life of Jesus, humility is essential, and in Chilton's case, a little less certainty would have gone a long way.

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