

# ○ REVIEW OF WILLIAM ARNAL, *THE SYMBOLIC JESUS: HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP, JUDAISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY*

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RELIGION IN CULTURE: STUDIES IN SOCIAL CONTEST AND CONSTRUCTION

## The Symbolic Jesus

Historical Scholarship,  
Judaism and the Construction  
of Contemporary Identity



William Arnal

Arnal challenges the recent accusations that the historical Jesuses of scholars like Mack, Crossan, Horsley, Vaage, and the Jesus Seminar are un-Jewish and, therefore, at least implicitly complicit with anti-Semitism. Arnal readily acknowledges the presence of anti-Semitism today (e.g., in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*) and in the past in New Testament scholarship (e.g., in the work of Walter Grundmann). Arnal also finds tendencies toward anti-Semitism in Christian anti-Judaism and in the apologetic scholarship that asserts Jesus' uniqueness and accordingly distinguishes him from his environment. Despite this 'bad karma,' however, he argues that scholarship has improved in the last thirty years, particularly by making Jesus' Jewishness central to historical reconstruction and by thereby normalizing Jesus as a part of his world, rather than distinguishing him from it.

Today, the Jewish Jesus is simply no longer a matter of academic debate. Instead, the debate is now about what kind of Jew the historical Jesus was. In this context, the accusation that some scholars produce un-Jewish Jesuses is a 'straw man,' which dismisses the accused scholars' hypothesis without discussion. Moreover, the accusation ignores debates about the ethnic and religious character of the Galilee, the fluidity of ancient markers of Judaism (see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*), and, in particular, the comparative nature of Mack's Cynic hypothesis.

For Arnal, however, the real issue is not these historical debates, but a moral (or political) divide. Despite the accusations against them, scholars like Mack and Crossan are actually demonstrably opposed to anti-Semitism and their work deliberately strives to compensate for Christian anti-Judaism (see Mack's *Myth of Innocence* and Crossan's *Who Killed Jesus?*). By contrast, those who reject their work peremptorily are guilty of assuming that all kinds of ancient Judaism must be the same and of an anachronistically modern view of religion. This rhetoric

tars the critics of the un-Jewish Jesus with a brush quite like the one they have used against Mack, Crossan et al. Where criticisms of the un-Jewish (often Galilean) Jesus often imply a connection between these recent Jesuses and the Aryan, Galilean Jesus of Grundmann, Arnal's riposte implies a connection between the un-Jewish Jesus objection and essentialist, anachronistic thinking (the ill-starred 'normative Judaism'). The retort combines the ultimate postmodern and the ultimate historical putdown. Finally, Arnal observes that the unfounded objections to the un-Jewish Jesus actually trivialize real anti-Semitism and racism in general.

The accusations about an un-Jewish Jesus are, in fact, 'red herrings,' providing a cover for academic, political, religious, and cultural identity work. In terms of the academy, the symbolic, Jewish Jesus creates a distinctive Anglophone scholarship independent of German and theological predecessors (i.e., Bultmann and the Second Quest). This scholarship rejects the criterion of dissimilarity and skepticism about the gospel narratives, and it frequently accuses advocates of the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus of employing these Second Quest perspectives. Politically, the Jewish Jesus absolves Christianity from complicity in the Holocaust and shows that Christianity is not fundamentally anti-Semitic. Here, the problem with the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus is that he does not sufficiently resemble the Eastern European Jews victimized by the Holocaust. Religiously, Jesus the Jew affirms traditional religion, both Judaism and Christianity, and rejects Reform Judaism and liberal Christianity. Traditional Judaism, whose hallmarks are those so often invoked in Christian polemic, is the other necessary to maintain Christian identity. Here, the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus is simply not supernatural, dogmatic, nor canonical enough. Culturally, Jesus the (traditional) Jew resists the postmodern corrosion of social, cultural categories by insisting on the stability of culture and, therefore, of identity. Here, the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus is simply too at home in the pluralities of postmodernism.

As he readily admits, Arnal situates himself with those accused of the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus. At least, he is for secular scholarship and accepts his place in the postmodern world, but he is more certain than Christian reformers like Mack and Crossan that Christianity is anti-Jewish. He also parts company with Mack, Crossan et al on the quest for the historical Jesus. Instead, he rejects the quest for the historical Jesus because (1) Jesus is so culturally prominent that historical inquiry about him bogs down in current cultural controversies; (2) the sources for the historical Jesus are hopelessly theological; and (3) Jesus is historically insignificant; that is, he does not explain the origins of Christianity. By itself, the first reason is irrelevant or a failure of scholarly nerve, but it does not stand alone. The second reason is inescapable and should give all would-be historians pause. The third reason is so compelling that it makes me doubt that the massive historical effort necessary to grapple with the first problem is worthwhile. Instead of the historical Jesus, Arnal calls for scholarly attention to the symbolic (i.e., ideological or mythical) Jesus, for providing reasons for our constructions (appealing to Bruce Lincoln's description of scholarship as 'mythology with footnotes'), and for scholarly self-consciousness.

I heartily agree with his moral plea, but it is much easier to call for it and to note its absence in others, than it is to achieve it. [Not incidentally, if we have read (too much) Foucault (or Nietzsche), we may also worry that such pleas themselves are simply so much scholarly 'norming.'] To assess Arnal's own success, we might ask if he provides footnotes for his myth work and whether he promotes scholarly conversation (one of Lincoln's reasons for footnotes). He certainly provides enough footnotes to link him with the proponents of the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus, the SBL Seminar on 'Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins' (which included

Jonathan Z. Smith and Burton Mack), and a (Frederick) Jamesonian type of postmodernism. He also cites Bruce Lincoln's work on myth (who relied on M. Detienne). Arnal's work is also indebted, however, to French thinkers like R. Barthes and P. Bourdieu, whom he does not mention. As he refers to them in other works, perhaps his specific audience, or other constraints, precludes their mention here. I wonder, however, if the critics of the so-called, un-Jewish Jesus will recognize this intellectual heritage. If they do not, is an important footnote missing? If they do not, has Arnal promoted scholarly conversation between the camps or simply reinforced the divide?

I put such questions to Arnal because I think he deserves credit for raising them. He joins those who have critiqued the hidden, apologetic religious work among scholars in raising consciousness about what scholars are doing in the present with their historical or theoretical work on Jesus and early Christianity. For a long time, no one needed to say anything about that or, more precisely, no one needed to say anything after the founders explained the apologetic reason for modern biblical studies – i.e., academic biblical studies worked to form modern (alienated) Christian identity (see, recently, Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins*). Thereafter, everyone either assumed or, more likely, forgot all about this mythic mission. Recently, the increasingly secular nature of biblical studies has reintroduced discussion of the reasons for and the productions of scholarly work. This important discussion will have more merit as it becomes more reflective. In particular, it will have more worth if scholars can begin to acknowledge their complicity with evil in their own mythic work and not simply continue to recognize the nefarious myth work going on in their opponents' similar identity constructions.