

Defending the church's truth claims

5. Working backwards from a death

Piety drives later generations of followers of Jesus to suppose more 'it must have been'; and what 'son of God' might have meant to Paul and 'Mark'

The Roman Catholic scholar RE Brown in his book **The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke** (New York: Doubleday, 1977) writes of the shifts of understanding of Jesus which feature in the writings of the New Testament in terms of what he calls 'christological moments'. For Peter, Paul, James and, the overwhelming probability is, for broadly the first two generations of followers, the christological moment was Jesus's resurrection; for 'Mark' it was his baptism. Brown explains that, in all, four christological moments are identified in the different writings of the New Testament.

When those who had known Jesus in his lifetime died out, the formula at baptism remained, but the tradition about Jesus was both formulated and passed on entirely by those who no longer had the personal touchstone, or yardstick, of having seen and heard and touched him. That is to say that 'faith' had lost direct touch with important parts of the original phenomena which had required explanation. There was no longer any experience of the phenomena of Jesus' way of looking at you, of his family, of his daily eating arrangements, to curb the exuberance of pious 'it must have been's'. This is not to say that the followers did not feel themselves to be in direct touch with Jesus as their risen lord. It is clear that they did, and that many expected him to return in a short time, perhaps one or two generations at most.

Piety broke out in every direction - infancy narratives, secret teachings, Acts of Pilate, gospels - a Gospel of the Egyptians, a Gospel of the Ebionites, A Gospel of the Hebrews. Not all at once, of course, but increasingly people's imaginations got to work on their experience. After a run of at most a couple of hundred years, most of these writings were suppressed as the 'orthodox' churches grasped control, and of many only fragments remain.

An immediate resurrection? We should not underestimate the sheer difficulty of finding out 'what really happened' even in the very earliest days. In those early days another of the most cherished of present day articles of faith was not yet settled. There is a clear relic in 'Matthew' of a tradition that at the moment of Jesus' death there was an earthquake, the graves opened and many of God's people arose from sleep - that is, there was an immediate resurrection. 'Matthew' records that at the moment when Jesus breathed his last "The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" ('Matthew 27. 51 - 53 NRSV). The fragment of tradition which 'Matthew' here preserves for us must have arisen very

early indeed, before the 'typology' of the 'third day' had been 'discovered'. But imagine the excitement that gave rise to that wonderful vision, now discredited.

The view of the writer of the gospel of 'Mark'. Looking for the present only at the books which the church did canonize by including them in the Bible we have inherited, we can see that in the beginning Paul and the first followers thought that the christological moment occurred after Jesus' death, at his resurrection. The first written departure from that understanding was that recorded in 'Mark'. His 'witness statement' is different. Broadly speaking, the historian thinks that eye-witness evidence is best and notes that later piety discovered for itself 'divine it must have been', which pushed the 'divinity' of Jesus ever further back in time. Piety (as will be noted in Part 8) has been at work again quite recently, improving the position in the universe of the mother of Jesus.

Son of God. Nobody knows exactly what 'Mark', writing some 35 to 45 years after the execution of Jesus, understood by the phrase 'son of god'. In the Jewish scriptures available to him the Jewish people are sometimes so referred to: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11. 1-2 NRSV). Sometimes Jewish kings are referred to, as in Ps 2. 7: "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'". (NRSV). In the passages which are quoted in the commentaries there is a general sense that the object has been 'chosen' or 'adopted' as a son. 'Son of God', the scholars tell us signified a 'special relationship' which God had made clear by some act or speech. Nearly all scholars agree that in the Jewish scriptures available to Paul and 'Mark' it does not signify that the person called 'son of God' is more than human.

The baptism of Jesus is in 'Mark's version of the good news the christological moment. When he wrote his gospel 'Mark' seems to have had it in mind to emphasise that Jesus had not been recognised as 'messiah' by his contemporaries, partly at least because he himself took care to keep it secret. For 'Mark's literary purpose it was essential to let the reader of his book into the secret at an early stage. He does so with a story of the baptism of Jesus.

There is no reason to suppose that Paul, or 'Mark' ever gave a thought to Jesus' birthday, or suspected any eccentricity in his biology.

Part 6 is devoted to further developments.