

RBL 05/2009



Bird, Michael F.

Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission

Library of New Testament Studies 331

New York: T&T Clark, 2007. Pp. xi + 212. Cloth. \$168.00.
ISBN 0567044734.

Andreas J. Köstenberger
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina

Did Jesus envision a mission to Gentiles? If so, did this mission commence during Jesus' own earthly ministry? Over against much scholarship on the subject, Michael Bird gives an affirmative answer to both questions. He disagrees with the eminent German church historian of the previous century, Adolf Harnack, who claimed that a mission to Gentiles "cannot have lain within the horizons of Jesus," as well as with Joachim Jeremias, who argued that Jesus, like his contemporaries, would have held that the salvation of Gentiles will take place at the end of time by an act of divine power apart from human agency.

The basic christological paradigm underlying Bird's study is that of Jesus as a prophet of Israel's restoration. Bird argues that the salvation of Gentiles was an integral part of the common expectation of Israel's restoration. Accordingly, Bird contends that, already during Jesus' earthly ministry, it had become "possible for Gentiles to share in the benefits of Israel's restoration" (58). Bird acknowledges that Jesus' mission was focused on Israel, yet he maintains that, in keeping with Jesus' role as a prophet of Israel's restoration, restored Israel became the means by which God's salvation was extended to the Gentile world.

Bird is to be commended for several things. To begin with, he takes seriously the Gospel material as an accurate reflection of the aims and intentions of Jesus' mission. Also, he seeks to place Jesus' missionary practice within the framework of Jewish eschatology. What is more, he acknowledges that Jesus' mission to Israel was primary, yet shows that Jesus also ministered to Gentiles. Indeed, if Jesus' words in the Gospels are any indication, the Matthean "Great Commission," to go no further, stakes the claim that the earthly Jesus envisioned a mission to the Gentiles. What is more, the Gospels make clear that Jesus did in fact minister to Gentiles.

At the same time, however, it must be noted that Jesus' ministry to Gentiles operated under certain constraints. As a close study of the Gospel material indicates, Jesus ministered to Gentiles only at their initiative, and then only within the understanding that ministry to them was the exception rather than the norm in light of the fact that Jesus' mission prior to the cross was centered on Israel. For this reason it seems inappropriate to speak of Jesus as engaging in an active "mission to Gentiles" during his earthly ministry, at least in light of the Gospel evidence. Thus Bird's proposal of an active mission to Gentiles on Jesus' part seems to find inadequate support in the Gospels.

In this regard, Bird makes too little of the salvation-historical logic that places certain constraints on Jesus' ministry to Gentiles prior to his crucifixion. (On the whole, Bird makes too little of the cross in his presentation of Jesus as prophet of Israel's restoration in conjunction with his mission to Gentiles.) It seems clear from a reading of the Gospels that the Gentile mission is predicated upon Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah, issuing in his crucifixion and his subsequent resurrection and exaltation with God, followed by the sending of the Spirit. As Peter's Pentecost sermon indicates, it was the outpouring of the Spirit, in keeping with biblical prophecy, that was part and parcel of the launch of the Gentile mission.

John's Gospel, too, suggests that only after Jesus' "signs" had been rejected by the Jews, and subsequent to the "lifting up" and glorification of the "Son of Man," was the stage set for Gentiles to be drawn into the new messianic community (see John 12:20-40). For these and other reasons, it appears that Bird's proposal exaggerates the realized aspect of Jesus' mission to the Gentiles while failing to give sufficient weight to the salvation-historical constraints under which it operated. Jesus' ministry to Gentiles at their initiative provides a foretaste of things to come, but, as John makes clear, when Greeks approach and want to "see" Jesus prior to the cross, the answer is, "Not yet."

The limited space of this review does not permit me to elaborate on the details of this alternative proposal (but see my *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, with P. T. O'Brien). I applaud Bird's courage in claiming that Jesus envisioned a mission to the Gentiles and his

effort to tackle this vital yet neglected subject of considerable theological and missiological import. I cannot agree, however, that Jesus engaged in active missionary outreach prior to the crucifixion. This, to me, seems to diminish the pivotal place of the cross and to dilute the clarity of the salvation-historical logic, pervading the Gospels and Acts, that places the mission to the Gentiles squarely in the period subsequent to Pentecost.

As Harnack's heir apparent, Eckhard Schnabel, wrote, "The real reason for the restriction of the mission [of Jesus] was ... theological and salvation-historical: salvation is offered first to Israel, then to the Gentiles" (*Early Christian Mission*, 1:295). While Bird's study is certainly suggestive, it appears that the perspective held by Schnabel and others that Jesus inaugurated but did not yet actively engage in mission to Gentiles should now be regarded as the "dominant" paradigm, replacing Harnack's view (which Bird calls "the dominant view" [3]). If Israel's restoration entailed a mission to the Gentiles, it must await the vicarious death of true Israel—Jesus—to get underway.

Both "times of refreshing" for Israel (Acts 3:19) and the intentional, centrifugal mission to the Gentiles were part of the "last days" (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28) brought about only by the crucified, risen, and exalted Jesus in sending the Spirit. Jesus did indeed launch the Gentile mission—but he did so only from his exalted position subsequent to the ascension. Thus when asked the question, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus replied that his followers would be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." Immediately prior to his ascension, Jesus therefore still placed both Israel's restoration and the Gentile mission in the (albeit imminent) future.