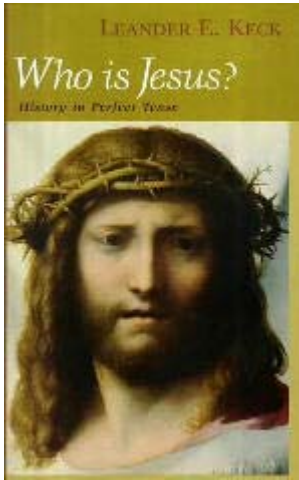


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Keck, Leander E.

Who Is Jesus?: History in Perfect Tense

Studies on Personalities of the New Testament

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In his preface, Professor Keck addresses the nature of his study of Jesus:

While I have eschewed providing even a sketch of Jesus' life and times, answering the question *Who is Jesus?* requires attending, at least briefly, to what can and cannot be known historically about Jesus of Nazareth. The result is something of a hybrid, neither history nor Christology proper but rather theological reflection on history—on those aspects of the Jesus of history that are central to his continued significance (ix-x).

This, then, is not a disinterested or objective account; Keck is clear and deliberate throughout about the connections he assays between the historical Jesus and Christ of faith. It is also, as he notes, not a history, although the author makes historical judgments in the course of his argument. The question of Jesus' significance for the present, Keck reasons, is not controlled by history alone; the sayings traditions include many items which Jesus did not say but which, in the opinion of early Christians, correctly summed up who Jesus was.

The first chapter begins by describing how the critical lives of Jesus differ from the gospel picture. These methods set aside the more supernatural elements in the texts for "a chastened but accurate portrayal of the Jesus who once was, set in the context of a society that once was" (8). Consequently, such studies can only discuss Jesus' relevance in terms

of the past. Spelling out his own approach, Keck points to four foci: Jesus the Jew, Jesus the expositor of the Kingdom of God, Jesus the crucified, and Jesus "the central figure in the moral life of his followers" (9). He discusses the basic criteria for historicity and their limitations: they produce a Jesus who differs both from Judaism and from early Christianity. Keck's method instead will allow for discussion of material which one could not safely judge came from the historical Jesus: ". . . for the task of portraying the Jesus of history, answering the question Is it true to Jesus? is as important and useful as deciding whether a saying came from his mouth or not" (20).

In the second chapter, Keck shows how the search for Jesus' superiority or uniqueness has the effect of isolating him from Judaism. He surveys Jewish scholarship on Jesus, ranging from Leo Baeck to Geza Vermes, and then outlines the approaches of Bruce Chilton, Richard Horsley, and N. T. Wright as three examples of Gentile interpreters who, in very different ways, think of Jesus as a deeply committed Jew. Keck rejects any notion that Jesus opposed normal Jewish piety, and adduces the twelve as proof that he saw his vocation as reconstituting Israel (50). The author doesn't believe that one can be much more specific about what sort of Jew Jesus was, although he believes we can rule out the main sectarian groups of the time: not a Pharisee, not an Essene, and not merely a disciple of the Baptizer. He took no interest in Gentiles, but his movement was entirely within Judaism. The final part of the chapter is a theological reflection on the irony that Christianity brought Israel's God to the Gentiles only because Christianity's founder focused only on God's Israel.

Keck begins his chapter on Jesus the Teacher by stating that while most interpreters agree that the kingdom of God is the central theme in his teaching, there is no consensus on what he meant by it. Keck argues that Jesus saw the kingdom as both present in his ministry and yet to be consummated. In his reconstruction, Jesus was a "kingdom-shaped teacher . . . who found it necessary to heal" (83). Jesus knew as well as anyone that there were other exorcists, and that healings did not prove the arrival of the kingdom; he expected people to believe his teaching in order to see the kingdom's presence. Those who believed him would have been expected to reshape their lives to conform to the character of the King, best described by "Father." Keck believes that Jesus didn't so often describe the nature of the kingdom as much as embody it, so actions such as the choice of the Twelve, the reception of children, and the itinerant nature of the ministry were manifestations of Jesus' conviction that the kingdom was both present and coming, both in and by means of his actions. In the "so what?" section of the chapter, Keck emphasizes that since Jesus never described the particulars of either the nature of the kingdom or the timing of its entrance, the fact that the world hasn't ended "does not flatly invalidate . . . Jesus' expectation" (109). He continues: ". . . the real question is not whether Jesus was right or wrong about the time of the kingdom but whether he was right about the God whom he imaged as king and father."

Keck's work in this section is important, and his reflections on the theological implications of Jesus' expectation of the kingdom's arrival are helpful. At the same time, historians will be nervous about how often he concludes that statements bearing the marks of the evangelists' theology nevertheless correctly sum up Jesus' intent. Keck also puts a great deal of weight on "if I as God's finger," judging that it represents Jesus' self-definition, even capitalizing it sometimes as if it defined a role Jesus played. Granted that the saying is historical, and that Luke's "finger" is more original than Matthew's Spirit, and that "by the finger" really means "as the finger," it still appears only once; it seems like a small stone holding up a large edifice.

Keck's fourth chapter deals with the cross. He argues that Jesus knew his death was likely based on what happened to the Baptizer, that the entrance into Jerusalem and the Temple incident are plausible triggers for his arrest and execution, and that there is no evidence of an early Christian group which focused on Jesus' words to the exclusion of his crucifixion. The cross, then, is a permanent feature of the Christian understanding of Jesus and of the God Jesus represented. Keck reasons that Jesus' sayings on self-renunciation show that the cross was not an accident, but the outcome of actions he undertook because of how he understood himself. The same sayings also reveal how Jesus expected his disciples to imitate him in self-negation, even if they weren't expected to be crucified with him, and this, Keck argues, is central to the enduring significance of Jesus for Christian living.

The final chapter examines Jesus' role as the "authorizing judge" for his followers' moral lives. As authorizing agent, Jesus' life, as well as his teaching, is the warrant for Christian behavior. That fact makes the historical study of Jesus of some importance: ". . . it remains the only means by which one can answer the question, To what extent is it Jesus or an imagined Jesus who is being assimilated" (167) as the ground for moral living? Other interpreters would take issue with "the only means"; Luke Timothy Johnson, for instance, much prefers church community and tradition over historical criticism as means for discerning the truth about Jesus. Turning to the image of judge, Keck describes how Jesus' life and teaching call others to reshape their own lives according to his. In this section, the author has a fine and profound discussion of how Jesus' commands focus on "the doings' consequences for the doer" rather than for the recipient of the deed (171-173).

Who is Jesus? will be of interest both to New Testament theologians and for those doing research on Jesus. The blend of historical and theological perspectives makes it ideal for faith-based or faith-friendly examinations of Jesus.