

The Birth of the Lost Tales Project

Introduction

One evening in 1995 at a meeting of the Enborne Consort at the house of Peter Davies, we were singing Wilkes' *Hosanna to the Son of David*. The words began to provoke questions among the singers: What did the word *hosanna* mean? Why hadn't it been translated? Did the people really wave palm branches? Where did they get them? Why did Jesus choose a donkey to ride into Jerusalem on that day?

Other than myself, all the singers were taking it for granted that the Gospel stories are straightforward records of events, because they had been taught that the Bible is a truthful account of what Jesus said and did. "Gospel truth" is usually taken to mean: "it happened exactly as it is written."

I took the singers' questions to a quite different group of friends, the "Wednesday Group", which had been meeting each week for over four years. The members of this group were from different Christian backgrounds and had originally come together through various parish and ecumenical events. We got on so well that we continued to convene long after organised events had ceased. After only a few weeks, our initial study and discussion of Luke's Gospel was transformed in depth and dimension when we obtained a prepublication proof copy of *The Historical Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan. This book opened our eyes to just how ignorant we had been about the first century of Christianity, about the kinds of people Jesus and his friends were, the brevity of their lives, how few of them could read, how their subsistence living was so different from our own relative affluence, and how alien from ours were their ways of thinking. Crossan's book provided us with information, background, methodology, and we were spurred on to try and find ways of looking at familiar texts more in tune with their originators' intentions. We found ourselves embarking on a long term quest for the historical Jesus and his immediate friends.

Our exploration made us first question and then abandon the common presumption that the gospel writers were engaged in writing a diary of what had happened. We began to see how impossible it was to take gospel stories literally, as if they were newspaper reports. We realised that the originators' first concern had been to recount their experience, to find stories and words to describe and remember it and to develop an appropriate response to Jesus and his teaching. Writing anything down came decades later, and even then it was incidental, not for a large readership nor a general public, neither for outsiders nor other peoples, not for later centuries—and certainly not with

us in mind! The first narrators did not create stories to be written at all, nor did the first recorders write them specifically for gospel compilers. We were led to wonder whether the way the compilers framed the stories into the gospels had been guided by their later presuppositions, making us ponder whether such framing enhanced the stories or in effect did violence to them.

We needed to devise strategies to read these privately written words with deference and respect, as if we were the first to come across someone else's personal correspondence, believing that the integrity of the experience and vibrancy of life which gave rise to the recorded words may be a gift that our ancestors would have wished us to share. We began to cultivate modes of deep listening so that the stories might tell again the things they had been crafted to encapsulate, for we began to discern that original meanings may actually be quite different from those construed in the texts as they have come down to us. We had to learn how to distinguish what the stories and words were originally meant to convey from the way they have come to be interpreted throughout centuries of Christian usage. We felt impelled to find out whether a precious thing deriving from Jesus and his immediate friends had been lost or mishandled, transmuted from an original beauty and power into something diminished or different altogether.

Our study did not stay with canonical scripture alone. By exploring paths suggested to us by today's historical Jesus scholars, we found forgotten texts to help us draw gradually closer to those earliest Jesus peoples. They, after all, were at the cutting edge of finding what can be said and what can be done in response to the creating Source of all things upon whom all depend for the gift of being alive in the present moment. We were startled into realising that it is now our turn, we who are alive today, to try to find right words, to tell good stories, to seek the deepest wisdom and to respond as perfectly as possible to the life we have been given and which we share with all in the household of this earth in our own century.

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So when faced with the questions asked by the singers those four years after the start of our Wednesday Group meetings, it was a shock to discover how far we had moved away from the common expectation of finding straight history in gospel stories. I came away from singing that evening with the Enborne Consort knowing we had a new agenda: to explore that tale in depth, to find history behind the story. What follows charts our exploration, how we were led to consider *Jesus' entry into Jerusalem* and link it with the apparently unrelated story of *Jesus preaching in the synagogue*. We struggled to ask questions whose formulation and attempts at answering would help reveal to us something of what went on in Jesus' time and the decades that followed his death. Did

the stories derive from Jewish scripture? Which scripture in particular? Which version? Which language? Who recalled that scripture and how was it applied to Jesus? Who created the story? Who told it? When was it told? Why was it told? How came it to be written down? Had the stories evolved and changed before they were first written? How have they changed on their journey to become the written form we have today? We hoped that with questions such as these, the stories themselves would disclose what had happened in the years after the events described, a history spanning a longer period of time than one day, and among people quite different from those in the stories.

Our exploration led us into trying to understand better the thoughts and concerns of the communities in which the stories about Jesus and his friends arose. We investigated the writings they consulted and how they interpreted them, what modes of discourse they developed, how story summaries came to be written, how they were used, shared and recontextualised by later communities. We explored how the original meaning of a story may become modified by reframing. We began to understand the circumstances in which religious language comes to be used, how it develops, how fragile it is, how it becomes fixed, how easily it can be misused even with the best intentions—although such good intentions cannot always be taken for granted.

Although this enterprise started with *The Entry Into Jerusalem*, it was another story that gave us the key to its meaning. In broad outline, we found in the *Jesus Preaching in the Synagogue* episode the implied story of a group of devout literate Jews who, on encountering Jesus and his friends, came to see in them the embodiment or fulfilment of a particular kind of messianic hope described in the Greek translation of their own scriptures.

The *Entry* story elaborates the wonder of this encounter by having Jesus and his friends enter Jerusalem in messianic triumph. (The donkey denotes the exalting and raising by God of humble nobodies, and is in contrast to a triumphal procession of someone such as Alexander the Great, who would have ridden on a horse.) The weaving of words from Psalm 108 around the story's structure, which comes from Zechariah, appears to imply that people later dramatically reenacted the encounter. We also discovered them developing theological connections, especially the nascent transformation of Jesus into messiah, a move from messianic age embodied and experienced among interacting friends to a messiah who brings about that experience and upon whom they felt that embodiment depends.

We then examined the writings that the literate Jewish group used to describe Jesus and his friends. Clues are there as to the sorts of people they were and to the character of the messianic hope the Jewish group saw embodied there. That the Jewish group made

this connection and appreciated the embodiment of such a messianic hope reveals the character of the Jewish group itself; its openness to God's action among those outside itself; its ability (at least initially) to dismantle insider/outsider divisions; how the openness of its own quest for God and Godliness was so magnanimous as to embrace outsiders, or those who by its own criteria apparently should not have been blessed by God at all. Their own quest was remarkable in that it embraced all creatures as children of the one God, and not just a chosen few in contrast to other forms of messianism at the time.

The texts as they have come down to us show evidence of a shift from this story of wonder at first encounter to a mutual assimilation of the two groups. The illiterate exalted/raised/awakened Jesus people were 'doing the words' which brought about the embodiment of God's kingdom—or rather an awakening to its reality and how people could interact so as to live lives of high quality even in dire circumstances. The literate Jewish group was able to describe and contextualize the vibrant experience of God's gifting of the other group. When fused, the practice of the one and the language and story telling of the other made it possible for a new, more articulate, and highly imaginative community to evolve within a particularly Jewish context and with Jewish leaders who were not originally Jesus' own friends.

The headiness of both deep spiritual awakening (or rather, awakening to the structured order of reality and of how best to respond to it and to all living creatures as deriving from one Source) and of a new language to articulate this experience led to imaginative and extensive interpretation of Jewish scriptures and to new understanding and articulation about what was happening in the discussions between the literate Jews and the illiterate Jesus people. The old texts and stories took on new and special meanings as they talked things through, and they began to make connections and explanations concerning what was going on, in particular, what they thought God was doing and who they began to think Jesus 'really was'. In the texts they eventually left behind, in the relatively fixed form they have remained for centuries, various thresholds can be discerned. We will show how the stories and themes developed and put that progress in some sort of chronological order. These thresholds were also turning points, partings of ways. As the original experience of all and the dynamic text-linking sessions led by the literate elite faded from the consciousness and practice of later generations, new and different experience emerged, so that there evolved different ways of understanding and explaining what was happening and what had happened. Sometimes these changes were unrelated to what went before, transmuting stories and previous insights and expressions into something quite different.

The anatomy of one example of such transformation gradually became clear as we studied the *Synagogue* episode. The change was that from ‘*embodied messianic age among a group of nobodies-in-particular*’ to ‘*a divine messiah who came to save*’. This shift eventually led to a bitter split between pro-Jesus Jews and anti-Jesus Jews who could not reconcile a high regard for the otherness and holiness of God with the attribution of divinity to a human being. That transformation began from a general recognition and rejoicing in the rescuing power of God manifested among a group of not-particularly-religious-Jewish nobodies, and ended in dismay by some at the idolatry of others who proclaimed the man Jesus to be God come down from heaven doing this rescuing for all.

We will identify some of the forks in the road which became parting of the ways in such transformations. We did this to clarify how the first message of well being (*Jesus’ gospel*) evolved into the proclamation (*Paul’s kerygma*) of early teaching as outlined in the first chapters of Acts. We took each fork as it came and tried to judge if it was really necessary to go one way rather than another, to see if the other road might have been a better route avoiding the sort of Christology which became such an enduring poison in Jewish/Christian relationships from earliest times.

I have already mentioned Paul, one who did not know Jesus himself, but who contributed to the early usage of Jewish texts and the evolution and elaboration of early Christian discourse. Is his role crucial in determining which roads were taken? He may have joined an enlarged post-Jesus group sometime later in its development, and later contributed to the spread and nurturing of other groups in many cities and towns.

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Today, modern scripture scholars are able to draw on a whole network of academic disciplines to broaden the picture of life in Jesus’ time, making it impossible to think any longer in simplistic ways. With expertise and technology becoming more available, both scholars and amateurs are now better able even than their teachers to reassess in far greater depth the surviving records of the sayings and events of two thousand years ago.

Sadly, the findings of such work are repudiated by many people who feel their faith being undermined by new discoveries and by imaginative historical reconstructions. Some clergy are afraid to allow broader and more enlightened views into their teaching and preaching for fear of upsetting the more vulnerable (or cantankerous) members of their flock. Thus, a narrow and simplistic interpretation of scripture is perpetuated and reinforced “to be on the safe side,” and those who query the value of such stances—whether clergy or laity—are warned not to rock the boat. The result is that truth may be

compromised in the process, even though the opinions of those who have studied the subject in depth are more likely to approximate to what actually happened. This state of affairs prevails even when the fruits of scholarship are passed on to those training for ordination and ministry.

Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that modern biblical scholarship remains, by and large, a well-kept secret from the general public. Most of the laity, even enthusiastic church-goers, are unaware that work is being done to build a more focused and believable picture of the historical Jesus and his friends, and therefore take no part in the intense discussion and speculation being produced on both sides of the Atlantic. Even though many simply do not want to know, at least all should have the choice.