

JESUS AS DIOGENES? REFLECTIONS ON THE CYNIC JESUS THESIS

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The last two decades or so have witnessed an unforeseen explosion of scholarly interest in the quest for the historical Jesus. The vestigial skepticism of the No Quest period and the halting steps of the New Quest have largely given way to renewed enthusiasm with regard to the historical recovery of Jesus. It is in this light that scholars have begun to talk about a new “renaissance” in Jesus research and the emergence of a Third Quest.¹ The results of this recent push, however, have been anything but uniform. Jesus of Nazareth has been variously tagged as a Galilean holy man,² an eschatological prophet,³ an occultic magician,⁴ an innovative rabbi,⁵ a trance-inducing psychotherapist,⁶

¹ See respectively M. J. Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” in his *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) 3–17; S. Neill and N. T. Wright, *Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 379–403. For other helpful assessments of recent Jesus research, see J. H. Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” in *Images of Jesus Today* (ed. J. Charlesworth and W. Weaver; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) 1–41; W. Telford, “Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; NTTTS 19; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1994) 33–74; N. T. Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” *ABD* 3.796–802.

² G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

³ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

⁴ M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁵ B. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984).

⁶ S. Davies, “On the Inductive Discourse of Jesus: The Psychotherapeutic Foundation of Christianity,” paper presented to the Jesus Seminar, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

a political revolutionary,⁷ an Essene teacher,⁸ a proto-liberation theologian,⁹ and a hellenized Cynic sage.¹⁰ The purpose of this article is to explore the last of these recently suggested models: that of Jesus as most closely akin to a Cynic philosopher. Here Jesus is largely cast as a thoroughly hellenized, noneschatological, contra-cultural quipster.¹¹ To begin with, a few words will be spent on those philosophical hound-dogs of old, the ancient Cynics. Next, I shall trace the rise, development, and context of the Cynic Jesus thesis. Finally, I shall offer a summary critique.

I. A Word on Ancient Cynicism

Tradition has it that ancient Cynicism arose with Socrates' student Antisthenes in the fourth century BCE.¹² However, it is Antisthenes' student, Diogenes of Sinope (404–323), who has come to represent the epitome of the Cynic philosopher. Etymologically, the name "Cynic" most likely derives from the Greek term for "dog" (*kyōn*). From Diogenes onward, the Cynics were popularly known as the "dog" philosophers of the ancient world, a name not

(October 22–25, 1992); idem, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

⁷ S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967); G. W. Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and His Kingdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

⁸ J. Allegro, "Jesus and Qumran: The Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Jesus in History and Myth* (ed. R. J. Hoffman and G. A. Larue; Buffalo: Prometheus, 1986); B. Thiering, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

⁹ J. M. Robinson, "The Jesus of Q as Liberation Theologian," paper presented at the Jesus Seminar, Edmonton, Canada (October 25–27, 1991).

¹⁰ J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); F. G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992); B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); idem, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 1993).

¹¹ For the argument that the rhetoric of Jesus and an early sector of the Jesus movement exemplifies a "contracultural" (vs. "countercultural") relation to Jewish culture, and a "subcultural" relation to the wider "Mediterranean Cynic counterculture," see V. K. Robbins, "Rhetoric and Culture: Exploring Types of Cultural Rhetoric in a Text," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht; JSNTSup 90; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 443–63.

¹² There is an ongoing debate as to whether Antisthenes or Diogenes should be credited as the first "Cynic" (e.g., see respectively Höistad vs. Dudley and Sayre below). For helpful surveys of ancient Cynicism, see R. F. Hock, "Cynics," *ABD* 1.1221–26; E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 275–81; H. D. Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics* (London/Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1983) 229–48. For more comprehensive studies, see three important works: D. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen, 1937); R. Höistad, *Cynic Hero and Cynic King: Studies in the Cynic Conception of Man* (Uppsala: Bloms, 1948); F. Sayre, *The Greek Cynics* (Baltimore: Furst, 1948). See also

inappropriate given the reports regarding their public behavior. The period of Early Cynicism stretched from the early fourth to the late third century BCE.¹³

There is very little hard evidence of Cynicism during the second and first centuries BCE. Scholars debate whether it truly died out during this period or merely suffered a low profile. In any case, something of a Cynic “revival” took place beginning in the mid-first century CE, and thus began the era of Imperial Cynicism.¹⁴ This period gave rise to such Cynics as Demetrius, Dio Chrysostom, Demonax, Peregrinus, and Oenomaus of Gadara.¹⁵ The collection of pseudonymous Cynic epistles stems primarily from this period.¹⁶ It appears that by the sixth century Cynicism as a live, distinct Greco-Roman philosophy had virtually disappeared.

The Cynics were noteworthy among ancient philosophers in that they generally shunned speculative philosophy. Thus, a Cynic was identified primarily by appearance and a characteristic set of behaviors—both of which exemplified their basic worldview—rather than by a particular philosophical system.¹⁷ Specifically, the Cynics were committed to the concepts of radical freedom (*eleutheria*)—especially freedom of speech, self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), and indifference (*apatheia*).¹⁸ They recognized the bounds of *nature* as their only

the two excellent collections of recent essays: M.-O. Goulet-Cazé and R. Goulet, eds., *Le Cynisme ancien et ses prolongements* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993); B. Branham, ed., *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy for Europe* (forthcoming).

¹³ The primary Cynic figures of this period are characterized in the sixth book of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, written in the third century. For a helpful summary, see J. Mejer, “Diogenes Laertius and the Transmission of Greek Philosophy,” *ANRW* 2.36.5 (1992) 3576–78.

¹⁴ On Imperial Cynicism, see M. Billerbeck, “Greek Cynicism in Imperial Rome,” in *Die Kyniker in der modernen Forschung* (ed. M. Billerbeck; Amsterdam: Grüner, 1991) 147–66; and especially M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, “Le cynisme à l’époque impériale,” *ANRW* 2.36.4 (1990) 2720–2833. Billerbeck contends that Cynicism did die out during the interim period (“Greek Cynicism,” 148). For an argument on the continuity between Early and Imperial Cynicism, see J. Moles, “‘Honestius Quam Ambitiosius’? An Exploration of the Cynic’s Attitude to Moral Corruption in His Fellow Men,” *JHS* 103 (1983) 120–23.

¹⁵ Lucian of Samosata describes the lives of Demonax and Peregrinus, the latter an erstwhile Christian turned Cynic. For a helpful introduction, see D. Clay, “Lucian of Samosata: Four Philosophical Lives (Nigrinus, Demonax, Peregrinus, Alexander Pseudomantis),” *ANRW* 2.36.5 (1992) 3406–50.

¹⁶ See A. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition* (SBL S 12; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); H. Attridge, *First-Century Cynicism in the Epistles of Heraclitus* (HTS 29; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

¹⁷ As Malherbe notes: “What made a Cynic was his dress and conduct, self-sufficiency, harsh behavior towards what appeared as excess, and a practical ethical idealism” (“Self-Definition Among Epicureans and Cynics,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 3, *Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World* [ed. B. F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982] 49).

¹⁸ In addition to the sources cited in n. 12, see B. Branham, “Diogenes’ Rhetoric and the Invention of Cynicism,” in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 445–73; Malherbe, “Self-Definition,” 48–59; A.

convention: ethically speaking, whatever violated nature was wrong; whatever fell within the bounds of nature was permissible. Thus, the ideal Cynic was one who practiced a trained individualistic asceticism that allowed for complete freedom from the naïve mores of Greco-Roman society and its various social conventions.

Moreover, the Cynic did his best to awaken the dullards of society to their pitiable state. This public service was accomplished through socially subversive means such as “shameless” public behavior (*anaideia*, *adiaphoria*) and offensively bold speech (*parrēsia*)—a program that one scholar has dubbed an “asceticism of transgression.”¹⁹ The image of the street-corner Cynic “using violent and abusive language, wearing filthy garments, performing acts of nature (defecation, sex) in public, [and] feigning madness” was apparently not uncommon in any number of major urban centers of the ancient Greco-Roman world.²⁰ The characteristic Cynic costume was well known: barefoot, long hair and beard, a rough, ragged, and dirty cloak, a walking staff, and a carrying pouch. The latter also functioned as a begging bowl, for the typical source of Cynic sustenance was public begging. In modern parlance, the Cynics were “hippies in a world of Augustan yuppies.”²¹

II. Jesus as Diogenes

From at least the second century, there has been a recognition of parallels between the ancient Cynics on one hand and Jesus and the early Christians on the other; early comparisons typically arose within polemical contexts.²² In the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, a number of scholars

Rich, “The Cynic Conception of ΑΥΤΑΡΚΕΙΑ,” *Mnemosyne* (series 4) 9 (1956) 23–29; J. Rist, “Cynicism and Stoicism,” in his *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 54–80; L. Vaage, “Like Dogs Barking: Cynic *Parrēsia* and Shameless Asceticism,” *Semeia* 57 (1992) 25–39.

¹⁹ Vaage, “Like Dogs Barking,” 35.

²⁰ Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 276.

²¹ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 421.

²² E.g., Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.50; Julian, *Oratio* 7. Aelius Aristides’ comparison of the Cynics with an impious people of Palestine (*Oratio* 3) may refer to Christians as well. For further discussion, see Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 19–23; G. Dorival, “L’Image des Cyniques chez les Pères grecs,” in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 419–43; D. Krueger, “Diogenes the Cynic among the Fourth Century Fathers,” *VC* 47 (1993) 29–49. The earliest and most explicit link between Cynics and Christians is found in Lucian’s satire on Peregrinus Proteus, the Christian-turned-Cynic (*Death of Peregrinus*); for an excellent discussion, see C. P. Jones, “Cynisme et sagesse barbare: le cas de Pérégrinus Proteus,” in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 305–18. The few instances of clear comparison notwithstanding, H. D. Betz rightly notes that with regard to the Cynics and early Christians themselves, “there seems to have been little appreciation on either side for what no doubt were similarities” (“Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis,” *JR* 74 [1994] 462).

focused on these ostensive parallels for comparative purposes.²³ More recently, the work of Abraham Malherbe, Ronald Hock, Gerd Theissen, and other scholars has served to highlight the Cynic parallels and background to various aspects of the NT.²⁴

In large measure, it was Theissen's work on the sociology of early Christianity that set the stage for the recent interest in the Cynic Jesus thesis. Theissen's argument that "Jesus did not primarily found local communities, but called into being a movement of wandering charismatics" opened the door for comparisons between early Christian itinerant preachers and wandering Cynics.²⁵ Much of the attention concerning Cynic-Christian parallels has focused on Jesus' mission instructions located in the sayings source Q (see Luke 10:1-16).²⁶ Here some of the instructions regarding dress call to mind the characteristic appearance of the Cynics. In the face of the similarities between the Cynics and Christians, however, most scholars are equally quick to highlight the rather obvious differences.²⁷

²³ Some of the earlier sources include S. Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London: Macmillan, 1911) 361; Dudley, *History of Cynicism*, 173-75, 204-7; W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (1925; reprint, New York: Cooper Square, 1970) 126, 169-71, 201-2; E. Hatch, "Greek and Christian Ethics," in his *Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (1889; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 138-70; Höistad, *Cynic Hero and Cynic King*, 199, 221; G. Boas, "Christianity and Cynicism," in his *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948) 87-128. For two insightful discussions of the recovery of Cynicism in the modern period that culminated in Nietzsche's "Neo-Cynicism" (wherein he conceived of Jesus in terms of an *ideal Cynic*), see Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics," 462-70; H. Niehues-Pröbsting, "Die Kynismus-Rezeption der Moderne: Diogenes in der Aufklärung," in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 519-56.

²⁴ See Malherbe, "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," ANRW 2.26.1 (1992) 268-333; idem, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); Hock, "Simon the Shoemaker as an Ideal Cynic," GRBS 17 (1976) 41-53; idem, "Lazarus and Micyllus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19-31," JBL 106 (1987) 447-63; idem, "Cynics"; G. Theissen, "Itinerant Radicalism: The Tradition of Jesus Sayings from the Perspective of the Sociology of Literature," *Radical Religion* 2 (1975) 84-93; idem, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

²⁵ Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 8. P. Hoffmann had previously noted this parallel in the course of his work on Q; see the published results from his 1968 dissertation: *Studien zur Theologie der Logienquelle* (NTAbh n.s. 8; Münster: Aschendorff, 1972) 318. Cynic philosophers and itinerant Christian preachers were two examples of that broader group of "wandering moralists" that are known to have traveled throughout the Roman Empire; see J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 143-45; M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 27-34.

²⁶ E.g., see L. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 38-66; J. S. Tashjian, "The Social Setting of the Q Mission: Three Dissertations," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers* (ed. D. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 636-44.

²⁷ E.g., see Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics," 460-62; Boas, "Christianity and Cynicism," 108;

In recent years, some have gone on to argue for the *direct influence* of Cynicism upon early Christianity.²⁸ In fact, a small but significant group of scholars has taken the final step and argued that the earliest Christians—and/or Jesus himself—are best understood in terms of the Cynic model. One of the most prominent advocates of this view today is the British theologian Gerald Downing. Since 1982, Downing has developed and defended the Cynic Jesus thesis in a variety of essays and books.²⁹ He argues that “[h]owever great a ‘paradigm shift’ it demands, we seem to have to face the strong possibility that Jesus the Jew must have also been seen as Jesus the Cynic.”³⁰ Downing’s arguments are based largely on a wide variety of textual parallels he draws between ancient Cynicism and early Christianity.³¹

In North America, a relatively small but influential group of scholars—generally from within the Jesus Seminar—have come to adopt the Cynic model as the operative paradigm by which to understand earliest Christianity and/or Jesus himself. John Kloppenborg’s work on Q (specifically his claim of an early, sapiential, nonapocalyptic layer of Q, dubbed “Q-1”), combined with the revival of a Greco-Roman history-of-religions approach, has become grist for this radical new proposal regarding Christian origins.³²

Hengel, *Charismatic Leader*, 30; H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective: Methods and Resources* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 68; Malherbe, *Paul and Popular Philosophers*, 8; M. L. Soards, “Reframing and Reevaluating the Argument of the Pastoral Epistles toward a Contemporary New Testament Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19 (1992) 389–98; Stambaugh and Balch, *New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 144–45; Theissen, “Itinerant Radicalism,” 88.

²⁸ They have had their predecessors: e.g., E. Wechsler, *Hellas im Evangelium* (Berlin: Metzner, 1936) 242–66; C. Schneider, *Geistesgeschichte des antiken Christentums* (2 vols.; Munich: Beck, 1954) 1.31–45. However, in 1966 R. MacMullen could write that such “theories of dependence” had been “disproved” (*Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966], 90).

²⁹ E.g., see G. Downing, “The Politics of Jesus,” *Modern Churchman* 25 (1982) 19–27; idem, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom* (London: SCM, 1987); idem, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); idem, “Cynics and Early Christianity,” in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 281–304. Downing’s *Cynics and Christian Origins* represents his most comprehensive argument to date and contains versions of several important previously published articles.

³⁰ Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom*, 132.

³¹ See especially his book of parallels, *Christ and the Cynics*.

³² See respectively J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Although Kloppenborg’s triple-layered Q stratigraphy is popular among the North American Cynic theorists, it should be clearly noted that Kloppenborg himself has drawn a distinct line between literary similarities and Cynic identification: “This is not to suggest that the Q group imitated Cynics or borrowed and adapted their ideology. The Jesus of Q is not a paradigm of *parrēsia* or, still less, of *anaideia*, as an expression of the freedom and self-sufficiency of the sage. The idiom

John Dominic Crossan, Burton Mack, Leif Vaage, and Ron Cameron are among the most well known advocates of the Cynic thesis within North American scholarship today.³³ Again all of them have connections to the Jesus Seminar, and all of them can be identified as working within the broader North American post-Bultmannian stream of NT scholarship.³⁴ In his monumental study of Jesus, Crossan concludes that Jesus is best described as “a peasant Jewish Cynic.”³⁵ Similarly, Mack has argued that “the Cynic-like data from Q and Mark are as close as we shall ever get to the real Jesus of history.”³⁶

Leif Vaage is even more explicit in his identification of Jesus and Cynicism. In his 1987 dissertation, he focuses on the question of the social identity of the earliest Q community.³⁷ According to Vaage’s analysis, the Mission Discourse in Q compares “quite thoroughly and closely to traditions of Greco-Roman Cynicism.”³⁸ More recently, Vaage has gone on to investigate the implications of his reconstructed Q-1 layer for the historical Jesus. He concludes that Jesus was “a bit of an imp, in Socrates’ terms a social gad-fly, an irritant on the skin of conventional mores and values.”³⁹ Although Jesus was a Jew ethnically speaking, he—like the Cynics—was not a particularly religious person. In fact, one could better characterize him as a “party animal,” who was most likely “shiftless and disrespectful of his parents.”⁴⁰

Finally, Ron Cameron has taken the Cynic thesis one step further yet. In

of Q is controlled not by a philosophical notion of freedom but by a historical and soteriological schema of God’s constant invitation of Israel to repent, and by the expectation of the imminent manifestation of the kingdom” (*Formation of Q*, 324).

³³ By grouping these scholars together under the general rubric of the “Cynic Jesus thesis,” I in no way intend to suggest that their various construals of Jesus as Cynic are one and the same. There is a definite spectrum—within the wider umbrella—concerning the question of just how “Cynic” Jesus really was.

³⁴ By this term “North American post-Bultmannian scholarship” I mean to signify that stream of scholarship that derives from the transplantation of Bultmannian seeds from German to North American fields of NT study, primarily in the form(s) developed by Bultmann’s two former students: Helmut Koester and James Robinson. See J. M. Robinson, “The Q Trajectory: Between John and Matthew via Jesus,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 173.

³⁵ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 421 (emphasis in text).

³⁶ Mack, “Q and a Cynic-Like Jesus,” paper presented at the Ottawa Conference on the historical Jesus, June 8–9, 1993 (quoted with permission).

³⁷ Leif Vaage, “Q: The Ethos and Ethics of an Itinerant Intelligence” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate school, 1987). See Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus’ First Followers According to Q* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) for the published results of his dissertation work.

³⁸ Vaage, “Q: Ethos and Ethics,” 349.

³⁹ Leif Vaage, “Q1 and the Historical Jesus: Some Peculiar Sayings (7:33–34; 9:57–58, 59–60; 14:26–27),” *Forum* 5/2 (1989) 175; see also idem, “The Son of Man Sayings in Q: Stratigraphical Location and Significance,” *Semeia* 55 (1992) 125.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Robert Funk in “Jesus the Social Gadfly,” *The Fourth R* 2/5 (1989) 1.

what Mack has referred to as a “watershed study,” Cameron attempts to overcome one of the problems that faces the growing post-Bultmannian conviction that Jesus held a noneschatological worldview: namely, how to account for Jesus’ decisive break with John the Baptist’s eschatological vision.⁴¹ For Cameron, the solution is discovered in his analysis of Q/Luke 7:18–35—John the Baptist too was a noneschatological Cynic-like figure.⁴²

Following the pattern of the Jesus Seminar itself, the North American Cynic theorists—particularly Crossan and Mack—have taken the theory from the cloistered halls of the academy to the shelves of the neighborhood bookstore. Each has recently produced a popularized version of his more scholarly treatment, with the design of informing a wider audience.⁴³ It is noteworthy that the Cynic thesis—at least as a viable heuristic for understanding earliest Christianity—appears to be gaining force within the Jesus Seminar itself.⁴⁴

The bulk of the evidence put forth in favor of the Cynic Jesus thesis can be summarized in terms of three general arguments: (1) Recent studies of Q and the *Gospel of Thomas* suggest that, contrary to the traditional portrait of early Christianity, Jesus and/or his first followers did not hold to a future eschatology or a Passion-centered soteriology.⁴⁵ (2) Rather, the earliest stratum of the Jesus

⁴¹ B. L. Mack, “Q and the Gospel of Mark: Revising Christian Origins,” *Semeia* 55 (1992) 18.

⁴² Cameron writes: “[W]e have observed that Q 7:18–35 characterizes John and Jesus not as eschatological preachers but as Cynic figures. . . . Q 7:18–35 may well serve to indicate that both John and Jesus have been recast apocalyptically only at later stages of the tradition” (“What have You Come Out to See?": Characterizations of John and Jesus in the Gospels,” *Semeia* 49 [1990] 62). Vaage also sees a Cynic-like Baptist (*Galilean Upstarts*, 87–106). Recently, in an unpublished paper, Neal Kelsey has offered a challenging critique of the ‘Cynic John the Baptist’ thesis: “A Barking Baptist? An Appraisal of the Cynic Hypothesis” (Claremont, CA, May 3, 1994).

⁴³ J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); Mack, *Lost Gospel*.

⁴⁴ E.g., see W. Braun, “Symposium or Anti-Symposium? Reflections on Luke 14:1–24,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992) 70–84; J. S. Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q: Recent Opinion on the People Behind the Document,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 (1993) 26–28; M. Meyer, “Introduction,” in *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (ed. M. Meyer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 16–17; S. J. Patterson, “Q, the Lost Gospel,” *BibRev* 9/5 (October 1993) 62; Robbins, “Rhetoric and Culture Text,” 443–63; D. Seeley, “Was Jesus Like a Philosopher? The Evidence of Martyrological and Wisdom Motifs in Q, Pre-Pauline Traditions, and Mark,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1989 Seminar Papers* (ed. D. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 540–49; M. G. Steinhauser, “The Violence of Occupation: Matthew 5:40–41 and Q,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992) 28–37. The Jesus Seminar has gone on record as stating that Jesus is best understood as a “laconic sage”; see R. Funk, R. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 32–34; see also Funk, “Jesus the Social Gadfly.” C. Talbert has suggested recently that the model of “a wandering Jewish Cynic” best describes the reconstructed Jesus of the Jesus Seminar (“Political Correctness Invades Jesus Research,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21 [1994] 247).

⁴⁵ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 282–302; Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 1–6, 36–39, 41–45; idem, *Myth of Innocence*, 57–60, 69–73. On these issues, see also J. S. Kloppenborg, “‘Easter Faith’ and the Say-

tradition (i.e., Kloppenborg's hypothesized Q-1, pre-Markan pronouncement stories, and an early layer of the *Gospel of Thomas*) reveals a Jesus whose teaching *style* and *content* are both representative of ancient Cynicism.⁴⁶ (3) Finally, first-century Lower Galilee—including the city of Sepphoris, located just five kilometers northwest of Nazareth—represented “an epitome of Hellenistic culture,” and thus provided the very setting necessary for Jesus to have come into favorable contact with itinerant Cynic philosophers.⁴⁷ Thus, the first argument purports to clear away the more traditional understandings of Jesus, while the second and third set up the Cynic Jesus thesis by means of ostensive parallels and probable historical connections respectively.

A number of recent studies have served to raise pressing questions for the first line of argumentation. Specifically, the now-standard North American post-Bultmannian presuppositions supporting such claims—including Kloppenborg's triple-layered Q theory (or similar redactional stratigraphies) and the privileging of the *Gospel of Thomas* as an early (pre-Synoptic), independent witness to Christian origins—have been challenged at a number of points. Space will not permit a summary of these counterarguments.⁴⁸ Rather, the remainder of this

ings Gospel Q,” *Semeia* 49 (1990) 71–99; A. Jacobson, “Apocalyptic and the Synoptic Sayings Source Q,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. Van Segbroeck et al.; 3 vols.; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992) 1.403–19; M. J. Borg, “Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship,” *HTR* 84 (1991) 1–22.

⁴⁶ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 72–88, 338–44, 421; idem, *Jesus*, 114–22; Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 105–30; idem, *Myth of Innocence*, 57–77, 84–87, 172–207; Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts*, 87–102.

⁴⁷ Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 66; also Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 15–19. On the case for a radically hellenized Lower Galilee, see also H. Guenther, “Greek: Home of Primitive Christianity,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 5 (1989) 247–79; H. C. Kee, “Early Christianity in the Galilee: Reassessing the Evidence from the Gospels,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. Levine; New York/Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1992) 3–22.

⁴⁸ For important criticisms of the triple-layered Q redactional theory and/or the conclusions some draw from it, see H. A. Attridge, “Reflections on Research into Q,” *Semeia* 55 (1992) 223–34; R. Horsley, “*Logoi Prophētōn?* Reflections on the Genre of Q,” in *Future of Early Christianity*, 195–209; C. Tuckett, “On the Stratification of Q: A Response,” *Semeia* 55 (1992) 213–22. For alternative interpretations of Q and/or its people, see D. Catchpole, *The Quest for Q* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993); A. Hultgren, “The Q Community,” in his *Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 31–41; E. Meadors, “The Orthodoxy of the ‘Q’ Sayings of Jesus,” *TynBul* 43 (1992) 233–57; M. Sato, *Q und Prophetie: Studien zur Gattungs- und Traditions-geschichte der Quelle Q* (WUNT 29; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1988); B. Witherington, “Wisdom’s Legacy: From Q to James,” in his *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 211–47.

For alternative understandings of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see C. Blomberg, “Tradition and Redaction in the Parables of the Gospel of Thomas,” in *Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (ed. D. Wenham; Gospel Perspectives 5; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 177–205; B. Dehandshutter, “L’évangile de Thomas comme collection de paroles de Jésus,” in *Logia: Les Paroles de Jésus—The Sayings of Jesus (Mémoire Joseph Coppens)* (ed. J. Delobel; BETL 59; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1982) 507–15; M. Fieger, *Das Thomasevangelium: Einleitung Kommentar und Systematik*

paper will be given to summary critiques of the second and third arguments, which together form the basis of the Cynic Jesus hypothesis itself.⁴⁹

III. A Summary Critique of the Cynic Jesus Thesis

The Cynic Jesus thesis serves to raise a number of interesting and challenging proposals concerning the historical Jesus. Certainly anything like a comprehensive response would require far more space than is available here. Nonetheless, this final section will offer in broad strokes a summary critique of the Cynic thesis. Here, the focus will be on crucial problems related to the central pillars of the thesis.⁵⁰

Jesus' Teaching and the Question of Cynic Parallels

It has been suggested by the Cynic Jesus theorists that Jesus' *style* of teaching as recovered in the earliest tradition—namely, the use of harsh aphoristic wit for the purpose of social and cultural subversion—finds its closest parallel in the similar style employed by the ancient Cynics.⁵¹ The Cynic theorists go on to suggest that the same is true with regard to the *content* of Jesus' teach-

(Münster: Aschendorff, 1991); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 124–39; F. Neirynck, "Apocryphal Gospels and the Gospel of Mark," in *The New Testament in Early Christianity* (ed. J.-M. Sevrin; BETL 86; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989) 133–40, 170; K. Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Secondary Gospel," *SecCent* 7 (1989–90) 19–38; C. Tuckett, "Q and Thomas: Evidence of a Primitive 'Wisdom Gospel'?" *ETL* 67 (1991) 346–60.

⁴⁹ Some scholars with an interest in the Cynic thesis would suggest that to focus on the question of whether or not Jesus and/or the earliest Christians were Cynics *per se* misses the point. In Kloppenborg's words, "Once it is seen that the question is not whether the Q people [or Jesus] were Cynics (that is, that the issue is not homology), the analogy of Cynicism can become fruitful" ("Q: People Behind the Document," 26). Two responses to this claim are pertinent. First, an exploration of the question of "homology" is essential to any responsible comparison. Second, while it is true that some scholars sympathetic to the Cynic Jesus thesis, such as Kloppenborg, may move simply in the realm of "analogy," this is hardly the case overall. Some Cynic theorists (e.g., Downing and, more cautiously, Vaage) have made explicit claims involving "homology." Others (e.g., Crossan and Mack), while at times ostensibly guarding themselves from claims of identity on a methodological level, nonetheless arrive at conclusions that suggest that a linkage much stronger than mere "analogy" for the purpose of "comparison" is operative in their reconstructions.

⁵⁰ For a book-length exposition and critique of the Cynic Jesus thesis, see G. A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995).

⁵¹ It is important to note here that the prior choice of one's data base of authentic Jesus material plays a crucial role in determining just where a particular reconstruction will go. More specifically, the Jesus Seminar's tendency to see aphorisms and (streamlined) parables as the fundamental data base ultimately leads toward making Cynic-like comparisons. To begin with another starting point in terms of data base—for example, Sanders's decision in favor of *acts* over *speech* material—will naturally tend to lead in a very different direction (*Jesus and Judaism*, 3–13).

ings. Specifically, Jesus' admonitions on the dangers of wealth and possessions, his critical words regarding the religious and moral *ethos* of his surrounding culture, and his commissioning of a band of wandering preachers (as detailed in the Q Mission Discourse, Q/Luke 10:1–16) are said to reflect a decidedly Cynic mode of existence. While surface similarities exist on both counts, several observations serve to reveal the problematic nature of moving from such general recognitions toward the more substantive claims of the Cynic thesis.

(1) First, there is the vexing problem of Cynic definition in the first century. It is generally recognized that great diversity existed among Imperial Cynics themselves. As Neal Kelsey has noted, “the sheer variety of Cynic texts simply will not permit facile definitions since they evince an extremely broad range of behaviors, ideological perspectives, and literary genres.”⁵² Imperial Cynicism, represented by such figures as Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, and Musonius Rufus, is actually an eclectic mix that includes strong Stoic elements; influences of Platonism and other Greco-Roman philosophies can be detected at other points as well.⁵³ Kelsey also makes the important point that Cynics of this period “exhibit a number of behaviors that can be understood under the more general rubric of asceticism.”⁵⁴ In short, a clear understanding and definition of first-century Cynicism—as opposed to other Greco-Roman philosophies, mixes of such, or simply the broader phenomenon of Greco-Roman asceticism—suited to function as a touchstone for comparative questions is simply not at hand. We are also left with the problem that those aspects of the behavior of Jesus and his early followers that some claim as Cynic parallels are in fact “paralleled” by a variety of wandering moralists and/or ascetic types of which the Roman world was never in short supply.⁵⁵

⁵² Neal Kelsey, “Finding a Cynic Definition,” paper presented at the New Testament Seminar of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA (October 6, 1992) p. 2 (quoted with permission). See also Malherbe, “Self-Definition,” 48–52; Betz, “Jesus and the Cynics,” 472–73; J. A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 60–66.

⁵³ See esp. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 46–94; B. F. Harris, “Stoic and Cynic Under Vespasian,” *Prudentia* 9 (1977) 112–14; Malherbe, “Self-Definition,” 48–49; M. McGuire, “Cynicism,” *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (ed. P. Meagher, et al.; Washington, DC: Corpus, 1979) 1.967; C. Tuckett, “A Cynic Q?” *Bib* 70 (1989) 351–55. See also J. Mejer, “Diogenes Laertius and the Transmission of Greek Philosophy,” *ANRW* 2.36.5 (1992) 3577; J. Toynbee, “Dictators and Philosophers in the First Century A.D.,” *Greece and Rome* (o.s.) 13 (1944) 56.

⁵⁴ Kelsey, “Finding a Cynic Definition,” 2. MacMullen makes a similar argument regarding the eclectic wandering “philosopher” type so familiar during the imperial era (*Enemies of the Roman Order*, 59–61, 88–94).

⁵⁵ For a brief discussion of the wandering moralists—the “philosophical itinerants, Cynics, wonder-workers, and priests”—that traveled the Roman roads and ship-ways, sharing their messages and living lives of material simplicity, see Stambaugh and Balch, *New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 143–45.

(2) Next, to claim that Jesus' use of aphoristic wisdom and biting wit is best understood within the context of Hellenistic Cynicism is to miss the most plausible context: Jewish wisdom.⁵⁶ The ancient Cynics hardly cornered the market on aphoristic forms of speech. Regardless of the origins question, by the first century such styles of speech were available for use throughout the Mediterranean world.⁵⁷ This raises the question of understanding Jesus as a *sage*, or wise man. It has been pointed out in recent years that to understand Jesus as a *prophet* is not to deny that he was, at the same time, a sage. Thus, one corrective side effect of the Cynic Jesus thesis has been to highlight the fact that Jesus did, in fact, function as a sage. However, the next question must be: What *type* of sage was he?

It is at this point that the Cynic model of sage becomes highly questionable with regard to Jesus. Instead, it is the model of *Jewish sage* that offers the most apparent parallel.⁵⁸ Jewish wisdom literature in general provides a comparative context within which one can witness the juxtaposition of a "wisdom" view of things without abandoning the fundamental convictions of the Jewish worldview⁵⁹—just the phenomenon one finds with regard to Jesus.⁶⁰ It is

⁵⁶ For an important recent study that goes a long way toward establishing this claim, see Witherington's *Jesus the Sage*, esp. 155–201. In his concluding section, Witherington writes: "A careful study of Jesus' words and deeds, in particular his parables and aphorisms, reveals a family resemblance to other early Jewish literature but only minimal similarity to the Cynic corpus, much of which post-dates Jesus in any case" (p. 385). The decision to privilege a "Greco-Roman" cultural and literary context in their reconstructions has often led Cynic theorists to neglect the very important "Jewish" background of the Jesus tradition. For a recent attempt to address this neglect, see C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (AGJU 25; Leiden: Brill, 1995).

⁵⁷ See MacMullen's comments at this point regarding early Christian use of aphorisms in the context of persecution (*Enemies of the Roman Order*, 90).

⁵⁸ See esp. B. Witherington, "Hokmah Meets Sophia: Jesus the Cynic?" in *Jesus the Sage*, 117–45; also B. B. Scott, "Jesus as Sage," in *The Sage in Israel and the Near East* (ed. J. Gammie and L. Perdue; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 399–415; R. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 2–4; A. Hultgren, "Jesus of Nazareth: Prophet, Visionary, Sage, or What?" *Dialog* 33 (1994) 263–73. On the model of Jewish sage, see the relevant essays in *The Sage in Israel and the Near East*.

⁵⁹ The term "Jewish worldview"—in the *singular*—is used advisedly. Certainly in a day when it is as common to find scholars talking of "Judaisms" as of "Judaism" one must be cautious here. However, in writing of the fundamental Jewish worldview, I have in mind the type of understanding expressed recently by N. T. Wright in his *New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 215–338.

⁶⁰ For example, contrary to the Cynic theorists, in saying that no one can follow him who does not first "hate his father and mother," and so forth (Q/Luke 14:26), Jesus is not exemplifying anti-social Cynic values, but rather is making use of Semitic-style overstatement as a rhetorical ploy. This becomes clear when other aspects of Jesus' teaching on family are taken into account, such as his strong admonitions concerning the honoring of one's parents, divorce, and the like (Mark 7:9–12; 10:2–10). See Stein, *Method and Message*, 8; R. Horsley, "Jesus, Itinerant Cynic or Israelite Prophet?" in *Images of Jesus Today*, 75.

important to note here as well that one of the most characteristic forms of Jesus' teaching style—the parable—has no real Cynic parallels and is a fundamentally *Jewish* form.⁶¹ In short, there is no need to postulate a *Cynic* background to Jesus' styles of communication. Bernard Brandon Scott nicely summarizes the situation:

The primary *forms* of the synoptic and Thomas traditions are forms closely identified with the Jewish wisdom tradition. . . . Second, the *content* of these forms is Jewish. The debate issues are Jewish in their interest and background. . . . [T]he problems with identifying the root of the wisdom tradition with Cynic wisdom remains irresolvable: the forms as well as the content are Jewish.⁶²

(3) Scott's comments bring us to the claim that the *content* of Jesus' teachings betrays strong parallels with similar Cynic material. As a first response, one must admit that—on the surface—some parallels do exist. Again, certain comparisons have been made from the days of early Christianity. The primary parallel is that of a warning against the seduction of wealth and material possessions. There is also the fact that both Jesus and the Cynics did engage in social critique. However, as one begins to press these general similarities, they rapidly give way to fundamental differences with regard to foundational principles, aims, and motivations. To highlight the similarities without appreciating the significant differences is to fall victim to a form of that ever-present danger for all comparative projects: "parallelomania."⁶³

The drawing of parallels between Jesus' teaching and Cynicism also falters in the face of certain aspects within the early Jesus tradition that appear distinctly un-Cynic. For example, while the Cynic theorists make much of the supposed similarities between itinerant Cynic moralists and the description of Jesus' traveling disciples given in Q's Mission Discourse, careful comparison suggests that, if anything, at crucial points the mission instructions serve to distinguish clearly the two groups.⁶⁴ Q/Luke 10:4 reads: "Do not take a purse or

⁶¹ On the fundamentally Jewish character of Jesus' parables (and other speech forms), see P. L. Culbertson, *A Word Fitly Spoken: Context, Transmission, and Adoption of the Parables of Jesus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) xiii; Scott, "Jesus as Sage," 401; C. Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other People* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 111–17; Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 155–201. Evans's helpful discussion of Jesus and rabbinic forms of speech is also relevant at this point (*Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 251–97).

⁶² Scott, "Jesus as Sage," 401–2.

⁶³ See esp. S. Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13; also P. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament," *ZNW* 74 (1983) 245–46. Downing's *Christ and the Cynics* is a clear example of this phenomenon, in a classic "Strack-Billerbeck" fashion.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, the Jesus Seminar has concluded that the bulk of the mission instruction does not represent authentic Jesus material; see Funk, ed., "The Jesus Seminar: Voting Records Sorted by Gospel, Chapter, and Verse," *Forum* 6/1 (March 1990) 18–19. Nonetheless, this section

bag [Greek: *pēra*] or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road." The *pēra*, or leather bag, was one of the defining elements of Cynic dress. It served the practical purposes of carrying pouch and begger's bag, and thus it came to symbolize the Cynic's *self-sufficiency* (*autarkeia*). In a parallel instruction (Luke 9:3), Jesus' missionaries are also instructed to go *without* a staff—another common feature of Cynic apparel. Given that a critical component of Cynic self-understanding was its particular *dress*—including the *pēra* and the walking staff—the mission instruction against these things is quite significant.⁶⁵ Finally, the charge to refrain from *greeting* anyone along the way would seem to fly in the face of the Cynic pattern of "bold speech" (*parrēsia*). Thus, as Richard Horsley has argued, in light of these instances the Q mission charge can, at critical points, justly be understood "almost as *anti-Cynic*."⁶⁶

There are other very important distinctions between the Jesus movement and Cynicism: Cynicism was an urban phenomenon that, paradoxically, encouraged both an unyielding antisocial individualism and yet, at the same time, begging for sustenance.⁶⁷ The Jesus movement, on the other hand, appears to have been largely a rural Galilean phenomenon that encouraged strong community bonds and included the sharing of ministry, food, and other resources according to need.⁶⁸ Finally, it is important to note that two of the activities central to the ministry of Jesus—healing and exorcism—afford no real parallels with ancient Cynicism.⁶⁹

of Q figures prominently in most arguments for the Cynic Jesus thesis, and so it is appropriate to discuss its implications at this point.

⁶⁵ Malherbe, "Self-Definition," 49; Kelsey, "Finding a Cynic Definition," 7–8.

⁶⁶ Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, 117. See also Hengel, *Charismatic Leader*, 15, 71; Kee, *Christian Origins*, 68–70; W. Michaelis, "*pēra*," *TDNT* 6.119–21; Stambaugh and Balch, *New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 143–45; Theissen "Itinerant Radicalism," 87–88; idem, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 15–16. The observation could be raised that such ostensive "anti-Cynic" polemic may in fact betray an all-too-conscious recognition on the part of the Q people of just how similar to the Cynics they actually appear. Even if this should be the case, that they strive to maintain the distinction in the manner in which they do remains instructive.

⁶⁷ Goulet-Cazé suggests that early Cynic individualism gave way in the imperial period to a more communal form of life ("Le cynisme à l'époque impériale," 2736–38). However, the ancient sources and most modern authors agree that "self-sufficiency" and the individualism it tended to spawn were important self-conscious characteristics of Imperial Cynicism.

⁶⁸ Crossan recognizes the import of these fundamental differences, which he attempts to reconcile with his Cynic thesis by qualifying Jesus as a "Jewish peasant or rural Cynic"; see his "Open Healing and Open Eating: Jesus as a Jewish Cynic?" *BR* 36 (1991) 15.

⁶⁹ There is virtually unanimous agreement within Jesus research today that Jesus functioned as a healer/exorcist; see Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 332; Davies, *Jesus the Healer*; P. W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *JAAR* 49 (1981) 567–88; and esp. G. H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (WUNT 2/54; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993). Downing acknowledges that the exorcism (Beelzebub) controversy in Q finds no obvious parallels in the Cynic literature ("Quite Like Q, A Genre for 'Q': The 'Lives' of Cynic Philosophers," *Bib* 69 [1988] 214).

Equally important is the fact that the Gospel tradition is strikingly free of a number of features that are deemed central to the Cynic mind-set and *ethos*. Jesus does not display the Cynic's radical commitment to freedom at any cost, nor the fundamental antipathy toward social law and convention. His few challenges to the Jewish law are predicated upon an unyielding commitment to the "weightier" things of that very law and the covenant of utter *dependency on God* from which they stem. Jesus also passed up numerous opportunities to challenge social conventions that any good Cynic would have jumped at: for example, religious sacrifices, religious and governmental taxes, and the civil institution of marriage. Furthermore, there are absolutely no indications that Jesus practiced the sort of "doggish" shamelessness that characterized the Cynics' public behavior. Rather than Cynic self-sufficiency, Jesus' life and teachings attest both to one's absolute dependence on God and mutual self-giving within community. And in diametric opposition to the Cynic criticism of religion, Jesus shared an intimacy with God the depths of which were expressible only within the filial bond of the father-son relationship.⁷⁰

First-Century Lower Galilee and the Question of a Cynic Presence

In recent years, historical and archaeological studies have suggested that Lower Galilee was influenced by various aspects of Hellenistic culture to a greater degree than previously thought.⁷¹ These observations have led some to claim that Jesus was most likely bilingual (Aramaic and Greek), that he probably taught in Greek on occasion, and that Nazareth's proximity to Sepphoris

⁷⁰ On Cynicism's negative attitude toward religion, see Goulet-Cazé, "Les premiers Cyniques et la Religion," in *Le Cynisme ancien*, 117–58; H. A. Attridge, "The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire," in *ANRW* 2.16.1 (1978) 56–60; Branham, "Diogenes' Rhetoric," 461–62; Vaage, "Like Dogs Barking," 36.

⁷¹ See S. Freyne, *Galilee, From Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980); idem, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); E. Meyers and J. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); E. Meyers, "The Cultural Setting of Galilee: The Case of Regionalism and Early Judaism," *ANRW* 2.19.1 (1979) 686–701.

Not everyone, however, has adopted this view of a thoroughly hellenized Galilee; for a counterargument, see L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 3–44; idem, "How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine?" *HUCA* 57 (1986) 83–111. Admittedly, Feldman represents the other end of the interpretive spectrum on this issue. But it is just such a perspective that can serve to tame some of the excesses—like the Cynic Jesus thesis—that have taken the "hellenized Galilee" thesis as their springboard.

most likely had a significant hellenizing, urbanizing effect on him.⁷² By extrapolating from such generalities, the Cynic theorists have constructed a picture of a thoroughly hellenized milieu for Jesus and his followers, one in which the presence and influence of Cynic philosophers are almost to be expected. The following observations, however, suggest that the notion of a hellenized Galilee supported by recent scholarship in no way provides for the type of hyperhellenized Cynic incubator as portrayed by the Cynic Jesus theorists.

To begin with, it is instructive to note that whereas the Cynic theorists appear sure and exacting in the conclusions they draw from contemporary archaeological findings, the archaeologists themselves are much more tentative. Recently, Eric Meyers, one of the world's leading archaeologists with regard to ancient Galilee and codirector of the Joint Sepphoris Excavation Project for several years, has pointed out the need for awareness of the biases that an interpreter brings to the data and the fact that, at the present time, the amount of data is simply not sufficient for hard conclusions.⁷³

Next, against the Cynic theorists' claims that Sepphoris would have had an urbanizing, hellenizing influence on Jesus and would have provided a suitable context for Cynic philosophers, three points can be made. First, some scholars have begun to question just what effect "hellenization" had on particular local populations in the Greco-Roman world. In relation to the question of the impact of hellenization on local pagan thought worlds of the time, G. W. Bowersock has argued that

the persistence of all these local traditions has suggested that there was no more than a superficial Hellenization in much of Asia Minor, the Near East, and Egypt. . . . [Hellenism] was a medium not necessarily antithetical to local

⁷² On Jesus' knowledge and/or use of Greek, see M. Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judea in the First Century After Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989) 7–18; Guenther, "Greek"; Kee, "Early Christianity in the Galilee," 20–22; S. Porter, "Jesus and the Use of Greek in Galilee," in *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 123–54. On the urbanizing influence of Sepphoris and other such cities, see R. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); J. A. Overman, "Who were the First Urban Christians? Urbanization in Galilee in the First Century," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers*, 160–68. Both Mack (*Myth of Innocence*, 65–67) and Crossan (*Historical Jesus*, 15–19) have emphasized this point in their reconstructions of a Cynic Jesus.

⁷³ Meyers notes that the question of the nature of first-century Galilee "will be answered conclusively only in the course of time when, after considerable excavation, a large enough corpus of early material is finally available for evaluation" ("Cultural Setting of Galilee," 689). On this issue, see also idem, "Identifying Religious and Ethnic Groups through Archaeology," in *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Biblical Archaeology* (ed. A. Biran and J. Aviram; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1990) 738–45; Freyne, *Galilee, From Alexander*, 141; D. Groh, review article of Meyers and Strange's *Archaeology*, *ATR* 64 (1982) 396; S. Herbert, "The Greco-Phoenician Settlement at Tel Anafa: A Case Study in the Limits of Hellenization," in *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990*, 118–25.

or indigenous traditions. On the contrary, it provided a new and more eloquent way of giving voice to them.⁷⁴

Such an observation coincides with Peter Green's contention that the two primary foci of a hellenized *mentality* in any local setting were the rulers and the administrative hopefuls—both of which had everything to gain by acclimating themselves as thoroughly as possible to the hellenized vision.⁷⁵ For most local communities throughout the empire, however, hellenization apparently functioned as a forced cultural veneer over a nonetheless vibrant indigenous worldview. This seems to have been especially true in the regard to local religious traditions.

Second, a number of scholars have argued that a notable political and economic rift tended to exist between the more urbanized, hellenized centers of the Greco-Roman world (such as Sepphoris) and the smaller surrounding peasant villages (such as Nazareth).⁷⁶ Thus, the claim that Jesus as a Nazarene would have been significantly influenced *in a positive direction* by Sepphoris's more hellenized ethos is questionable. Add to this the fact that there is a deafening silence with regard to Sepphoris and other such Galilean cities in the early Jesus tradition, and one can surmise that, if anything, the more hellenized urban centers represented the type of ethos and opulence that Jesus was actively set against.

But what of Sepphoris and other specifically Galilean cities? Were such locales bastions of Hellenism as the Cynic theorists contend? At the 1993 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, the Frontiers in Biblical Scholarship Series sponsored a lecture by Eric Meyers that touched on this very

⁷⁴ G. W. Bowersock, "Paganism and Greek Culture," in his *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 6–7.

⁷⁵ Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) esp. 312–35. Green's observation at this point can stand apart from his not uncontroversial assessment of the Hellenistic age.

⁷⁶ See esp. A. Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz-Israel: Relations of the Jews in Eretz-Israel with the Hellenistic Cities during the Second Temple Period* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1990); also S. Applebaum, "Judea as a Roman Province: The Countryside as a Political and Economic Factor," *ANRW* 2.8 (1977) 371; S. Freyne, "The Geography, Politics and Economics of Galilee and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 104–21; idem, "Urban-Rural Relations in First-Century Galilee: Some Suggestions from the Literary Sources," in *Galilee in Late Antiquity*, 75–91; R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974) 28–56. To be fair to the state of the discussion, it should be noted that a number of those from the archaeological side have begun to question the nature of this rift, given the growing data involving city-village trading patterns, and the like. See J. A. Overman, "Recent Advances in the Archaeology of the Galilee in the Roman Period," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 (1993) 48–49; J. Strange, "First-Century Galilee from Archaeology and from the Texts," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers* (ed. E. H. Lovering, Jr.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) 81–90.

question. The fact that it was Meyers who addressed the issue is particularly interesting, since it is his archaeological work that both Crossan and Mack appeal to in their portrayals of a thoroughly hellenized Galilee. In the course of his lecture, Meyers explicitly addressed the claims of the Cynic theorists:

To suggest, therefore, that recent excavation and work in Galilee demonstrates and supports the idea that there are significant urban influences on Jesus' early life and teaching is a gross oversimplification. Taking the example of the work of Crossan that an urbanized Galilee was the appropriate setting for the transmission of popular Cynic ideas . . . we must say that this is not evident in either of the Galilees we have explored.⁷⁷

More pointedly, both archaeological and literary evidence suggests that, although Lower Galilee experienced hellenization on various cultural levels, the indigenous Jewish population generally retained its Jewish religious worldview.⁷⁸ Thus, one can surmise that, similar to segments of diaspora Judaism, Galilean Jews—under the pressure of hellenization—tended to bond even more closely with their religious traditions just *because* of the close proximity of pagan and/or Hellenistic influence.⁷⁹ With specific regard to Sepphoris, Meyers has noted that the first-century population was deeply *Jewish* in their religious sentiments, and that archaeological remains reveal “a Torah-true population”—hardly the type of setting conducive to converting a Nazarene Jew to a Cynic mind-set.⁸⁰

Finally, the issue of explicit Cynic presence in proximity to Galilee must be addressed. Theissen and others have pointed toward the existence of Cynics such as Menippus, Meleager, and Oenomaus as evidence of a five-hundred-

⁷⁷ E. M. Meyers, “Jesus and His Galilean Context,” paper presented at the Frontiers in Biblical Scholarship Series (revised), Washington, D.C. (November 21, 1993) p. 7 (quoted with permission). Incidentally, in their response papers, both E. P. Sanders and Paula Fredriksen concurred with Meyers's assessment. See also E. M. Meyers, “The Challenge of Hellenism for Early Judaism and Christianity,” *BA* 55 (1992) 84–91.

⁷⁸ On the religiously *traditional* nature of the first-century Galilean Jewish population, see S. Freyne, “Galilee-Jerusalem Relations According to Josephus' *Life*,” *NTS* 33 (1987) 600–609; D. Flusser, “Paganism in Palestine,” in *Jewish People in the First Century*, 1065–1100; P. J. Hardin, “The Religious Nature of First-Century Galilee as a Setting for Early Christianity,” *Neot* 27 (1993) 331–50; E. P. Sanders, “Jesus in Historical Context,” *TToday* 50 (1993) 429–48. J. J. Collins has noted that the “common thread of Jewish identity”—for Palestinian and diaspora Jews alike—came from reliance on the Jewish religious tradition (*Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* [New York: Crossroad, 1983] 245). It is just such a reliance that is blatantly missing in the various portrayals of the Cynic Jesus.

⁷⁹ On the diaspora phenomenon, see A. T. Kraabel, “Paganism and Judaism: The Sardis Evidence,” in *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme: Influences et affrontements dans le monde antique: Mélanges offerts à Marcel Simon* (Paris: de Boccard, 1978) 13–33; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 45–83.

⁸⁰ Meyers, “Challenge of Hellenism,” 88.

year span of Cynic presence as close to Galilee as Gadara.⁸¹ However, although each originally hailed from this region, it is far from certain that they went on to live and teach there.⁸² Beyond this, none of them can be dated to the early first century.⁸³ This dating problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Imperial revival period of Cynicism, which replaced its dearth from the second century BCE on, is not attested until the *middle* of the first century—and thus *after* the death of Jesus and the birth of the Christian movement.⁸⁴ Thus, as far as the historical data go, one must agree with Hans Dieter Betz that to presume a Cynic presence in the Galilee of Jesus' day is little more than "fanciful conjecture."⁸⁵

IV. Concluding Thoughts

In light of these observations, one can conclude with Betz that "the proponents of the 'Jesus as Cynic' hypothesis have made it easy to criticize it simply on methodological grounds."⁸⁶ What, then, is the cash value of the Cynic Jesus model, a model whose proponents are willing to defend it in the face of all apparent odds? One can surmise that several things are involved here. First, with regard to Downing, for instance, it seems that the mass of surface parallels have proven to be mesmerizing, and the Cynic values of poverty and degradation of wealth seem particularly apropos today, given the crass consumerism of the modern First World. Interestingly, Downing retains a place for a strongly Jewish, if Cynic, Jesus. He even maintains a place for the incarnation, conclud-

⁸¹ See Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 88–89. Downing emphasizes this as well; see *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 147–48.

⁸² A point that Theissen admits (*Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, 88).

⁸³ For dates and sketches on these three Cynics, see Dudley, *History of Cynicism*, 69–74, 121–23, 162–70. Downing acknowledges this fact but nonetheless speculates that Cynicism may well have been a "living force" in first-century Gadara (*Cynics and Christian Origins*, 147–48).

⁸⁴ The Cynic "revival" of the imperial period begins with Demetrius's presence in Rome ca. 40 CE. On Demetrius and conjectural dates for his life, see J. Kindstrand, "Demetrius the Cynic," *Philologus* 124 (1980) 84–89. Hock has noted that "problems of evidence constantly dog the student of imperial Cynicism" ("A Dog in a Manger: The Cynic Cynulcus among Athenaeus's Deipnosophists," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* [ed. D. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990] 20).

⁸⁵ Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics," 471. Similarly see Horsley, "Itinerant Cynic or Israelite Prophet?" 73; P. Perkins, "Jesus before Christianity: Cynic and Sage?" *Christian Century* (July 28–August 4, 1993) 749–50; A. E. Harvey, review of Downing's *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom*, *Theology* 92 (1989) 553.

⁸⁶ Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics," 471. I take it that Betz is using the term "methodological" in a broad sense here; at least that is the manner in which I would intend it. This is to say that the focus of this critique is not methodology per se (in the narrower, technical sense), but rather issues involving the basic data and their interpretation.

ing that “when God accepted the conditions of a human life, these Jewish-Cynic ideals were the ones he lived and tried to share.”⁸⁷

In the hands of the North American Cynic theorists, however, Jesus’ Jewishness tends to be quickly reduced to little more than an ethnic accident. Other factors are operative in the North American versions as well. For Mack, to classify Jesus as a Cynic is to remove once and for all from him any connotations of *uniqueness*. Not only was Jesus merely human, but he effectively had *nothing* to do with what later became the Christian religion. Rather, “Christianity” is nothing more than the accidental eclectic result of rampant myth making within the multifarious early Jewish Jesus movements and Hellenistic Christ cults. If anything, the Markan author—not Jesus—is to be credited with what came to be Christianity. Moreover, under Mack’s analysis, this is nothing for the Markan author to be proud of.⁸⁸ Thus, for those like Mack who have adopted a revamped form of the history-of-religions approach and have reduced “religion” to a subset of “social formation”—without remainder—the Cynic thesis serves the purpose well.⁸⁹

One must add to this the ongoing (since Schweitzer) scholarly quest for a noneschatological Jesus who preached a pure this-worldly kingdom of values (values, interestingly enough, that foreshadowed the moral worldview of the twentieth-century postmodern liberal academy).⁹⁰ If such is the dream, the

⁸⁷ Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom*, 159. For an insightful critique of the Cynic Jesus thesis that focuses on Downing’s model, see Witherington, “Hokmah Meets Sophia: Jesus the Cynic?” 123–45.

⁸⁸ Thus runs Mack’s basic thesis of Christian origins as detailed in *Myth of Innocence*. For helpful exposition and critique of Mack’s thesis, see Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* chaps. 4, 8, 10; L. W. Hurtado, “The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?” *JSNT* 40 (1990) 15–32.

⁸⁹ This assessment applies as well to J. Z. Smith, from whom Mack has gleaned his sociological theory of religion (see Smith, *Drudgery Divine*), as well as Cameron and Vaage.

⁹⁰ On the rise and nature of the new noneschatological Jesus, see Borg, “A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus,” *Forum* 2/3 (September 1986) 81–102; Robinson, “The Q Trajectory,” 173–94; Patterson, “The End of Apocalypse: Rethinking the Eschatological Jesus,” *TToday* 52 (1995) 29–48.

However, the eschatological Jesus remains alive and well in the scholarly world today. See, e.g., D. C. Allison, Jr., *The End of the Ages has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 101–14; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); R. H. Hiers, *The Historical Jesus and the Kingdom of God: Present and Future in the Message and Ministry of Jesus* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1973); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, 289–397, 451–54; B. F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master-BUILDER and the House of God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992) 41–80; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 222–41, 319–40; B. Wiebe, “The Focus of Jesus’ Eschatology,” in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Changing Horizons* (ed. D. J. Hawkins and T. Robinson; Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 26; Lewiston, NY/Queenston, ON: Mellen, 1990) 121–46; J. C. Williams, “Neither Here

ancient Cynic is about as close as one is going to get. The notion of the "kingdom" held by the ancient Cynics—now largely imposed on the historical Jesus by the North American Cynic theorists—is one in which the lordship of Yahweh plays no role, one in which divine intervention is neither expected nor needed.

Of course, this understanding of Jesus is not entirely novel. The contemporary "Jesus as noneschatological Cynic" model finds an intriguing nineteenth-century prototype in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. With regard to his own books, Nietzsche himself writes that "here and there they achieve the highest thing achievable on earth, cynicism."⁹¹ His explicit depiction of "the kingdom of heaven" is a virtual mirror image of that expressed by the contemporary North American Cynic theorists.⁹² Such connections, particularly given the current popularity of poststructuralist thought among some NT scholars—the Cynic theorists included—serve to raise a perennial problematic related to the Quest: To what degree is the historical Cynic Jesus essentially a reflection of the thought world and/or values of his modern-day co-constructors?⁹³ Whether these apparent connections are instructive or merely interesting is, of course, debatable. In either case, the evidence that can be marshaled against the Cynic thesis warrants the conclusion that, with regard to the ongoing search for a viable model for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus, one must look elsewhere.⁹⁴

Nor There: Between Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Jesus' Kingdom Sayings," *Forum* 5/2 (June 1989) 7–30; B. Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 59–74, 170–80.

⁹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write such Good Books," #3; in *Ecce Homo* (ed. W. Kaufmann; New York: Vintage, 1969) 263–64.

⁹² Nietzsche writes: "The 'kingdom of heaven' is a state of the heart—not something that is to come 'above the earth' or 'after death.' . . . The 'kingdom of God' is nothing that one expects; it has no yesterday and no day after tomorrow, it will not come in 'a thousand years'—it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere" (*The Antichrist*, #34). On Nietzsche's noneschatological Cynic Jesus and his "kingdom," see Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics," 468–70; H. D. Betz, "The Birth of Christianity as a Hellenistic Religion: Three Theories of Origin," *JR* 74 (1994) 15–25; W. Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 118–20; P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) xxvi–ix.

⁹³ Both Crossan and Mack have made explicit mention of their use of various forms of post-structuralist thought. In regard to Crossan, see especially *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad/Seabury, 1980); idem, "Difference and Divinity," *Semeia* 23 (1982) 29–40. Regarding Mack, see *Myth of Innocence*, 23 n. 10; also the comments of V. K. Robbins, "Text and Context in Recent Studies of the Gospel of Mark," *RelSRev* 17 (1991) 20. See also the relevant discussion in Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* 71–75, 89–94.

⁹⁴ An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1994 annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. My thanks goes to Julian Hills, Robert Stein, Gerald O'Collins, William Kurz, Sarah Fletcher Harding, Brad Hinze, and Michel Barnes for helpful comments on previous drafts. I am also grateful to Burton Mack, Eric Meyers, and Neal Kelsey for access to their unpublished work cited within and permission to quote from it.