

A Discussion: Richard Burridge's Jesus

Can the historical Jesus teach ethics? In response to Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*

Richard Burridge is best known for his book, *What are the Gospels?*, which argues convincingly that the gospels belong within the broad generic category of the Graeco-Roman biography.¹ The consensus that ‘the gospels are not biographies’ rests on a set of modern assumptions about what a biography should contain; measured against the yardstick of ancient biographies, however, the gospels clearly represent the same kind of literature. Of course, that does not mean that they are in every respect like other Graeco-Roman *bioi* or *vita*e. The gospels remain distinctive. One indication of this distinctiveness is that the title attached to them is not *bios tou Iesou* or the like, but *eukelion kata . . .* followed by an evangelist’s name. The gospels intend to be more than just a further contribution to the biographical literature of the ancient world. Burridge allowed that ‘gospel’ might represent a distinctive and new ‘subgenre’ within the broader biographical genre; there is no difficulty about such a move if we understand genre as a dynamic concept rather than a static one. Perhaps we might want to qualify the claim that ‘the gospels are biographies’ by stating instead that ‘the gospels represent a new development within the biographical genre’.

The all-important question is what further significance this biographical hypothesis might have. *Imitating Jesus* is Burridge’s answer to that question.² Graeco-Roman biographies can present their subjects as models for imitation, and that is just what the gospels do. The gospels do not merely contain explicit ethical instruction proceeding from the mouth of Jesus; they also present Jesus as exemplary in his deeds. We therefore cannot extract Jesus’ ethical instruction from its narrative context, basing our accounts of New Testament ethics exclusively on, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. That is to ignore the overarching biographical genre of the work in which the Sermon on the Mount is to be found, the Gospel of Matthew. New Testament ethics cannot be detached from the figure of Jesus. If the gospels are about

¹ Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, SNTS ms, 1992; rev. edn, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

² *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). The present response to Burridge’s book is a slightly revised version of a presentation to the ‘Use, Influence and Impact of the Bible’ Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, at the Boston meeting in 2008.

Jesus, so too is New Testament ethics: that is the central argument of *Imitating Jesus*.

The first main chapter, on ‘the historical Jesus’, is entitled ‘Jesus of Nazareth: Great Moral Teacher or Friend of Sinners?’ This is followed by a series of chapters on Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts and John. As a result, material from one of the gospels may be found both in the chapter on, say, Mark, and in the historical Jesus chapter. We receive ethical instruction from the words and deeds both of the historical Jesus and of the Jesus of Mark, Matthew, Luke or John. A certain reduplication is evident here: the same item of ethical instruction may be ascribed both to the historical Jesus and to one or other of the evangelists. Indeed, Burridge emphasises the importance of beginning New Testament ethics from the historical Jesus, and sees this as one of the points where his work marks an advance on earlier work in this field.

In my view, the appeal to the historical Jesus is out of step with Burridge’s own biographical hypothesis. If the gospels are biographies, why should we be concerned with a Jesus supposedly extracted from somewhere behind these texts? Burridge has taken this route not because of his own biographical hypothesis but because he wants to align New Testament ethics with the long-running research project we romantically designate the ‘quest of the historical Jesus’. This is a project that invites us to pursue the chimera of an uninterpreted Jesus, Jesus as he really was, in himself, before it occurred to anyone to interpret him as something else. But no such uninterpreted Jesus is accessible to us. Historical Jesus research adds its own updated biographies of Jesus to the traditional ones we already have in the canonical gospels. The results are sometimes strikingly novel and more often boringly familiar; but in no case do we encounter a Jesus who has not been subjected to multiple processes of interpretation, both ancient and modern. Might we do better to keep to the existing biographies, rather than writing a new one of our own and giving it the place of honour as the first main chapter of our work on New Testament ethics?³

Jesus’ teaching about ‘the kingdom of God’ usefully illustrates this issue. In line with most historical Jesus scholarship since Johannes Weiss, Burridge

³ Fuller discussion of hermeneutical issues entailed in historical Jesus research is found in my ‘The Quest for the Real Jesus’, in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 156–69, and ‘*Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing one’s Way*’, in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 96–114.

believes that ‘[a]t the core of Jesus’ teaching is a stress on the kingdom of God and a consequent need to repent’.⁴ In consequence,

Jesus’ ethical teaching is not a separate body of moral instruction, but rather part of his preaching of the eschatological in-breaking of the reign of God, which demands a total and immediate response from his hearers.⁵

Jesus’ eschatological proclamation underlies his ethical demands, and his ethical demands are motivated and empowered by his eschatological proclamation. Eschatology and ethics belong together, like a hand and a glove.

In my view, the route that leads from Jesus’ ethical teaching back to his eschatological proclamation is much less direct. Jesus’ teaching that we should love our enemies is a case in point.⁶ The passage in which this is taught looks conclusively authentic to scholars who like to pronounce on such matters. If there ever was a Q, it was in Q, and in Q’s earliest stratum. This passage teaches that we should love our enemies because in doing so we imitate God, the heavenly Father who bestows sun and rain on the just and the unjust alike. There is no sign here of the dawning of the kingdom of God: this is an ethic grounded in the beneficent regularity of the created order, not in eschatology. Yet we are assured that ‘the radicalization of the love commandment, which Jesus extends to love for one’s enemies’, is to be understood ‘[i]n the light of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God’ and thus as a sign of the eschaton.⁷ Neither of the two versions of the teaching about love of enemies says any such thing. The link between ethics and eschatology is a modern scholarly construct which makes it legitimate to ignore the plain sense of the text in question.

So how have we reached the conclusion that ‘[a]t the core of Jesus’ teaching is a stress on the kingdom of God’? The source of this conclusion is the Gospel of Mark, which tells how, after the arrest of John, Jesus returned to Galilee proclaiming that ‘the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near’ (1:15). Mark is here summarising Jesus’ proclamation as he understands it, not reporting an individual saying. It is therefore the evangelist himself who has led us to conclude that the kingdom of God lies at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. If that is our view too, we have borrowed it from Mark.

⁴ Imitating Jesus, p. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶ Matt. 5:43–8; Luke 6:27–36.

⁷ E. Lohse, cited approvingly by Burridge, Imitating Jesus, p. 55.

In adopting this view, however, we also go far beyond Mark. Elsewhere, the evangelist does not present the kingdom of God as the core of Jesus' teaching. The phrase reappears three times in Mark 4 in connection with Jesus' parables; later, 'entering the kingdom of God' is synonymous with 'entering life'.⁸ But the kingdom of God is hardly a dominant theme in this or any other gospel. If we use it to systematise Jesus' diverse teaching, as the key that will unlock every door, we take this interpretative decision at our own risk.

In speaking of 'the kingdom of God' as the content of Jesus' initial proclamation, Mark does not define it. He simply states that Jesus came into Galilee announcing its imminent advent. Under the continuing influence of Weiss and Schweitzer, twentieth-century scholarship assumed that 'the kingdom of God' refers to the imminent eschaton, the great event which filled Jesus' mind throughout his ministry and determined both his preaching and his activity; an event still predominantly future but perhaps already in process of realisation in and through Jesus' own activity. The evangelists speak of 'the kingdom of God' or 'the kingdom of heaven' in a variety of ways, and they speak of much else besides. Yet for Jesus himself, the imminence of the eschatological kingdom was an all-consuming passion. As such, it must have determined his ethics. Love for enemies may ostensibly be linked to the universal gifts of sunshine and rain, but its real basis must be the imminent coming of the kingdom. That, at least, is the conclusion towards which most twentieth-century historical Jesus research directs us; and it is also the view espoused by Burridge.

I suggest, on the contrary, that the historical Jesus project never successfully detaches itself from the evangelists' interpretations of Jesus. Aspiring to recover an uninterpreted Jesus, it simply adds new interpretations of its own, often based on questionable readings of gospel passages.

My modest proposal, then, is that New Testament ethics should concern itself with the writings of the New Testament. That would seem to follow from the hypothesis that the gospels are biographies, and that they give us access to Jesus as interpreted by his early followers.

Francis Watson

Durham University, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham, DH1 3RS, UK

francis.watson@durham.ac.uk

⁸ Mark 4:11, 26, 30; 9:47; 10:23, 24, 25.