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The Philosophy of Jesus: "Wisdom is Justified
of All Her Children."

I. Introduction

Jesus Christ of Nazareth lived upon the face of our world
almost 2000 years ago. Throughout the Jewish country, this
single personality lived, and walked, and worked. He truly
was the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Son of the Father.
The talk of the town. The common folk loved him, the religious
men of the day hated him, Satan tempted him, and eventually the
crucifixion awaited him. It has often been said of Jesus
that, through his life, personality, and deeds, he has made more
of a mark upon the pages of history than any other person who has
ever lived.

Many are the titles which were given to this Jesus both
during and since the time of his physical presence upon the
pages of the human race. In his own time, he was called Master,
Teacher, Lord, Son of man, Son of David, the carpenter's son, and a host of
other titles. Today, he is referred to as many things,
ranging from "Son of God as Redeemer," but can we say that Jesus
was a philosopher?

In dealing with the question of whether or not Jesus was a
philosopher, we must begin by first understanding a few of the
basic problems of philosophy.

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The Philosophy of Jesus: "Wisdom is Justified
of All Her Children."

I. Introduction

Jesus Christ of Nazareth lived upon the face of our world almost 2000 years ago. Throughout the Judean countryside, this unique personality lived, and walked, and proved Himself truly to be the Son of the Living God. Wherever He went, Jesus became the talk of the town. The common folk loved Him, the religionists of the day hated Him, Satan tempted Him, and eventually the Romans crucified Him. It has often been well stated of Jesus that, through His life, personality, and deeds, He has made more of a mark upon the pages of history than any other person who has ever lived.

Many are the titles which men have given to this Jesus both during and since the time of His physical presence among the members of the human race. In His own time, He was called Master, Savior, Lord, Son of man, Son of God, Teacher, Prophet, Rabbi, the carpenter's son, and a host of other appellations including that of Beelzebub. Today, He is referred to in many, many ways ranging from "Son of God to Superstar," but can we say that Jesus was a philosopher?¹

In dealing with the question of whether or not Jesus was a philosopher, we must begin by first understanding a few of the basic premises of philosophy.

II. What is philosophy?

The word, philosophy, has its origin in two Greek words meaning when taken together, "the love of knowledge or wisdom."² Although there have been some recent deviations from this early definition of philosophy, its central theme has not changed between the times of the early Greek philosophers, who first used this understanding, and the philosophers of our day, who still use it. The basic definition has not been changed, but it has been expanded and expressed in various words and phrases. For instance, one writer has defined philosophy as: "the love or natural attraction that people have for wisdom or for the ultimate constituents of everything that is real."³ All he has done here is to add to and express a little differently the same thing that the ancient Greeks were saying.

Modern definitions of philosophy are quite varied in nature and form. One definition is: "a study of the processes governing thought and conduct; investigation of the principles that regulate the universe and underlie all reality."⁴ Another is: "the endeavor to discover by systematic reflection the ultimate nature of things."⁵ This source adds to this definition: "It is sometimes used to denote a system of speculative beliefs, or a set of convictions on important issues."⁶

Defining the subject matter of philosophy is very difficult, if not impossible. This is the case because of the ~~enormous range~~

~~of the~~ panorama of subjects which come under its investigation.

Not content to be confined to its own discipline, philosophy reaches into other fields in attempting to put together an epistemology which will combine the knowledge of other systems into one orderly view of the whole universe. Commenting on this issue one authoritative source says:

philosophy does not, like the sciences, have a province of nature that is peculiarly its own; it has no distinctive subject-matter. In short, it is not a body of specialized knowledge, but a kind of activity, 'a peculiarly stubborn effort to think clearly,' as William James once put it, a sustained process of reflection toward ultimate understanding.⁷

Since philosophy does work so extensively in the domains of other disciplines, we might illustrate its role here by likening it to that of the town busy-body. Most every town has at least one person, usually a lady, who does not really have any business of her or his own. Consequently, this person begins to mind everybody else's business. In a like manner, philosophy, having no clearly defined subject matter of its own, we could say, is the busy-body of the academic world. In this positive role, philosophy's task is to be constantly analyzing and integrating knowledge obtained through other fields of investigation.

Philosophy shares a close kinship to both religion (or theology) and science. Bertrand Russell, the brilliant 20th century philosopher, spoke of philosophy as "a No Man's Land" existing "between theology and science."⁸ The dependence on human reason within philosophy points to the common ground it shares with science. However,

we must also point out that there are marked differences between science and philosophy.

Science is God's gift to mankind to understand, live in, and use the world. Its basic presumption has become that nature is the sum total of all that is. The interest of science is to objectively explore and discover cause and effect relationships through what is called the "scientific method". This work is often concentrated largely within the laboratory environment and involves solving problems in order to understand the mysteries of the universe. Preoccupation of the scientist with experimentation leaves one very important task wide open; that of interpretation and definition of terms and concepts involved in the process and developed out of it. This is where philosophy becomes all important. Scientists can and do make philosophical assumptions on their own, but it remains for the philosopher to determine what significance each field of science as well as the discoveries of these fields have for mankind. While the scientist must strive to be objective in his work, the philosopher must seek an understanding of reality 'in relation to man's most enduring and most deep-rooted interests.'⁹ These are some of the deep-rooted differences in the relation between science and philosophy, but what about philosophy and religion?

Common interests of philosophy and religion such as concern for a better world, reflections upon a future life after death, and a shared search for order in this world and beyond are traits which

bind these two fields of endeavor closely together. While the search for some sort of order in the universe is a common characteristic to both fields, their approaches are very different. Illumination through human reasoning is of utmost importance in philosophy. It may even be said that philosophers have faith in the powers of reason. In religion and theology, on the other hand, encounter may be through some supernatural happening within the realm of the participant's experience, through direct revelation from God, or through faith in God on the part of the believer.

It is apparent that philosophy and religion do share some common interests, reflections, and goals. Obviously, this is well and good, for otherwise there could be no cooperation between the two. But, all is not fair as one gazes at the horizon where philosophy and religion come into interaction. For, there arises not just a small cloud of conflict here; rather than a small cloud, there is often an ominous thunderhead of almost frightening proportions at this intersection. In this light, we see such statements as made by Rousseau, himself an outstanding philosopher, as he said, "Philosophy can do nothing which religion cannot do better, and religion can do a great many things that philosophy cannot do at all."¹⁰ On the other hand, consider the statement by Karl Marx that, "religion is the opium of the people."¹¹ The battle has begun and continues as rhetorical thunderbolts are flung back and forth from one position to the other in the on-going struggle over who has the

right answers to life's enduring problems and questions.

After all, the search for these answers is at least part of the purpose of philosophy. In other words, "The chief purpose of philosophy", says Henry Thomas, "is to establish mental serenity through contemplation of wisdom."¹² So it is that philosophy strives toward this goal hand in hand with that elusive creature, wisdom, sometimes as its pseudonym and sometimes as its companion. Fueled by this wisdom and the powers of human reason, philosophy's quest reaches deep into and beyond every realm of reality in nature.

Having thus laid out a few of the basics of philosophy, let us now go on to look at another question.

III. Who is worthy of taking on the title of philosopher?

Webster's definition of philosopher consists of three parts: "1. a person who studies or is learned in philosophy. 2. a person who lives by a system of philosophy. 3. a person who meets all events with calmness and composure."¹³ In looking at the origin of the word, "philosopher", we find that in the Greek form it meant literally "lover of wisdom." In present use "philosopher" as a word is not confined to any single strict interpretation.

In the simplest sense and in much common thought, a philosopher can be anyone who displays or practices wisdom in thought and life. Here, we can picture either the thinker in the environment of the place of study or the ordinary individual who in communication with others expresses self in making a statement

such as, "Well my philosophy is living by the Golden Rule." In this light anyone could be classified as a philosopher. Perhaps not in the technical sense, but at least in the self-image of the individual we may say that there is a definite, perhaps unconscious, but none-the-less actual affirmation of being a philosopher. For instance, I once worked under a foreman who told me that his philosophy was to ask questions in order to learn about things. He was very surprised when I told him that since he had a philosophy of life, he must be a philosopher, and that the method he employed was the same as that used by one of the greatest of the early Greek philosophers, Socrates. Of course, later I learned that his philosophy differed from that of Socrates in at least one respect. While Socrates was aware of the limits of his knowledge, this was not one of the attributes of this foreman, because he thought that he had all the answers! This is one notion concerning the image that is projected of the philosopher, but it would be well to point out that there are others.

Whether one's occupation is that of homemaker, carpenter, teacher, painter, minister, farmer, or anything else, the view from inside is different from the outside. Those who work within the field of philosophy are no exception to this general rule. Theirs is a very intellectual and often complicated field. Often the very nature of their work and the high degree of intelli-

gence required for it combine to cause within the philosopher an exalted attitude toward the profession of which he or she is a part. From this view of their calling, these intellectuals have at times erected an almost insurmountable fence around their little group. This fence serves as a boundary which cannot be broken except by those whose intelligence far exceeds the ordinary individual. In order to meet the qualifications to enter into this field, it appears that one must have developed an epistemology or system of knowledge broad enough to encompass the many different aspects of life. In this respect, philosophy is a very exclusive vocation into which only a very select few may find entrance.

IV. Was Jesus a philosopher?

After this rather lengthy look into the nature of the philosopher, it is now time to return to the original question, was Jesus a philosopher? In general, there is a wide variety of answers to this question, depending upon the perspective of the speaker. For some the answer is yes. Others say no. For instance, Karl Jaspers, himself a famous philosopher, has said of Jesus, "He was not a philosopher who reflects methodically and systematically orders his ideas."¹⁴ Jaspers identifies Jesus as a philosopher by devoting unto Him a chapter in his book, The Great Philosophers. Yet, he definitely does not see Jesus as any type of a systematic philosopher. Another authority asserts, to quote his own words, "Jesus was not a philosopher; not a builder of systems."¹⁵ No doubt

in his concept of a philosopher, one essential is that he must be systematic in his philosophical teachings. Finding no such orderliness in Jesus' teachings, he could not accept Jesus into the ranks of the philosophers of the world.

Concerning the structure of the teachings of Jesus, it does not appear that He actually meant for them to be neatly arranged in the manner of an organized system of philosophy. In agreement with this statement, one writer says, "Jesus apparently never aimed at a systematic and logical presentation of his teaching."¹⁶ As a matter of fact from a little closer consideration of the handing down of these teachings, we must realize that it was not Jesus but rather His disciples who recorded what we actually have left of His original sayings. The Scriptures which record these sayings also tell us that we do not have recorded all of what Jesus did. In John 21:25, we are told, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." This last verse of John's Gospel shows that we are only aware of a small portion of the actions of Jesus. It would be foolish to believe that our record of His teachings is complete either. Considering the incomplete record of Jesus' words, the backgrounds of those who recorded them, and the difficulty in remembering such material, it follows that much of the philosophical teachings of Jesus may have been omitted from

the original texts and consequently from our modern texts.

I make the previous statement in view of the fact that the writers of the four Gospels were mainly concerned with the spread and growth of the religious teachings of Him whom they considered to be the Son of God. Now, if this was their main concern, then they would be much more likely to emphasize the religious insights of Jesus while largely neglecting His philosophical teachings. After all, why should these men who were dedicated to preaching "Christ and Him crucified" turn from this, their main theme, to that of Jesus the philosopher? However, other early sources from people who lived closer to Jesus time than we do had a different image of Him.

A recent article in Newsweek reveals that "pagan sources" in early paintings of Jesus depict Him as their idea of a 'young philosopher'. Adding to this concept, "He was a cleanshaven figure in the tunic and mantle of an itinerant Cynic, two fingers raised in blessing, a scroll or book under his left arm."¹⁷ Also within the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, one can see the theme of Jesus as a philosopher. In the canonized New Testament Gospels, Peter heralds the triumphant proclamation of the Good News as he says of Jesus, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Thomas' Gospel departs from this statement for he quotes Matthew's answer to the question of Jesus as, "You are like a wise man and a philosopher."¹⁸ The impressions of these early people of Jesus as a philosopher

grew out of His life and teachings. Although some would argue with the artists' conception of Jesus as the philosopher, the statement made by Matthew of Jesus as, "like a wise man and a philosopher", would be for most scholars a realistic assessment of Jesus in terms of philosophy.

The theme of Jesus as a philosopher has largely disappeared from modern philosophy. This is evidenced by the fact that He is excluded from many of the books which have been devoted to the history of philosophy. One may find whole chapters that deal with the contributions of men like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others whose philosophies have been directed toward the religious dimension of life; but for Jesus and His philosophy, seldom even one page is included. I remember from my introductory course in philosophy the professor's remark concerning Jesus. His words were something like, "Jesus a philosopher, certainly not; Son of God, maybe; but philosopher, no."

There are several reasons for the negative attitudes of many philosophers toward Jesus. First, is the age-old problem of reason versus faith. Both philosophy and religion start out in search of ultimate truth. Where the two disciplines part company is in the modes through which that truth is sought. The religious quest depends a great deal upon faith. Philosophy, on the other hand, is dependent upon reason and its ability to light the way to truth, although it can be said that the philosopher has faith in reason.

Even though philosophers have frequently stressed the importance of the role of reason in the search for truth, the amount of emphasis placed upon its value has been a controversial area even among those who have been its advocates. Some thinkers such as William James in the United States, Jacques Rousseau, Soren Kierkegaard, and others on the European continent, for different reasons, have raised serious questions as to the adequacy of reason in the approach of philosophy to life and truth. The empirical thought on the part of James and his predecessors has been opposed by rationalistic systems beginning with the seventeenth-century thought of Rene Descartes. This "rationalism" as it has come to be called is culminated in the work of G.W.F. Hegel, with his notion that reality could be totally comprehended through human reason. These two positions, "rationalism" and "empiricism", represent two extreme philosophical perspectives in relation to reason.¹⁹

The early Hebrew thinkers and writers based whatever they thought or wrote upon the presupposition of the existence of God. While most philosophical systems have sought either to prove or disprove the existence of God, the early Hebrew proclaimers of wisdom took this concept for granted as unquestionably true. Jesus, in the tradition of these ancients, grounded what He said in faith in God. Thus, faith played a very important role in the work of all these men. One writer suggests that the foundation of faith in God on the part of the thinkers of the Old Testament

robs them of much of the recognition which they might otherwise have received from the intellectual world.²⁰ Evidently, the same attitude has been applied to Jesus and His teachings. This is a problem for some today, but it did not pose a problem for the people of their day and time. For as William Barclay, the noted Bible scholar, has pointed out, the basic orientation of the Hebrew mind was toward what he called "concrete realities" as opposed to the philosophical frame of mind.²¹ They simply did not approach problems as we today would or even as other peoples within their times did. Things which we are bothered by did not present the same problems to these ancient peoples. It was entirely consistent and rational that they grounded their wisdom upon the foundation of their faith in God. Today in a world filled with knowledge, scholars find it difficult or impossible to either use this approach or to respect one, like Jesus, who did use this knowledge base.

The battle between reason and faith has raged back and forth for years within the fields of both philosophy and religion, and will not likely ever be decisively won or lost by either of the opposing forces. Since neither reason nor faith can be proven to supercede the other, it is necessary to do one of three things. One may overemphasize the importance of reason, one may overemphasize the importance of faith, or one may seek some kind of balance between the two. The latter is the most logical approach and is advocated by many modern influential thinkers including Josiah

Royce.²² Jesus also took this approach. Revelations of the will of God the Father were the driving force in Jesus' life, but He used the powers of a reasoning human mind in carrying out the will of God.

Those who object to the teachings of Jesus in relation to reason, speaking of its absence, would do well to take a good long look at what He actually taught; rather than what they think He taught. For He certainly did not, as some have accused, ignore the value of reason in His approach to life. He did not take for granted all that He was told by those who were the authorities of His world. Instead, He brought about a vital new understanding of God and how men and women were to live in relation to Him. In doing so, Jesus used the dynamic powers of reason which were very much alive and at work within Him.

On various occasions, Jesus did rebuke others because of their use of reason, not because they were using this gift of God, but because they were using faulty reasoning. In Matthew 16:6-12 is one of these instances. The disciples misunderstood what their Lord had said to them about leaven. They took the reference to leaven as having something to do with taking bread to eat. Jesus had to lead them through the process of reasoning that they might know that He was warning them against the teachings of the Pharisees. In several confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 21:25, Mk. 2:6, and Mk. 12:28) for instance, we find them

reasoning to defeat Jesus through asking questions which He could not answer without incriminating Himself. Writing about Jesus' response to such situations, Edward Bauman says:

But he always discerned their intentions and frustrated their purposes by turning the question back to them. He was able to use every situation advantageously, not only confounding his enemies, but teaching his disciples at the same time.²³

One writer has said of Jesus, "he was unacquainted with the profound ethical thinking of Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics."²⁴ Whether or not He learned the Socratic method by way of Greek thought cannot be determined. But, we can see that He certainly excelled in the use of this technique by the way He answered these questions with more probing questions which proved His position.

William Horder in reviewing Emil Brunner's view of the position of reason in Christianity makes the following statement:

the theologian ought to use reason to answer alternatives to the Christian faith. Reason cannot convert a man to Christianity (only the encounter with God in Christ can do that) but reason can prepare the ground for conversion and can remove intellectual obstacles.²⁵

Jesus used a similar approach. He was too much a theologian, Himself, to do otherwise. He used reason as a means of revealing to mankind what God was teaching through Him. We can see this in the temptations in the wilderness, where He reasoned with Satan using His own working knowledge of the Scriptures. We can also see it in His confrontations with those who made themselves His enemies. The outstanding example of His use of reason is found in the eighth

chapter of John verses 3-11, the familiar story of the woman taken in adultery. The drama unfolds as her accusers brought her to Jesus desiring His justification of their wish to stone her. Instead of answering immediately Jesus stooped down and began to write on the ground. Then after having reasoned through every facet of the situation, He challenged them with, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Everybody left except Jesus and the woman, and when no one else could condemn her, Jesus **said** to her, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." This incident illustrates perhaps better than any other the incredible gift that Jesus had to analyze the situation and quickly come to a reasonable solution. He did not ignore Isaiah 1:18 which reads, "Come now, and let us **reason** together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Rather than ignoring it, He took every opportunity to reason with those who would listen. Therefore, in order to do justice to Jesus and His teachings, it is essential to realize that He used both faith and reason with an art and consistency that is truly amazing.

Another objection which occurs to me is that among philosophers there is an element of jealousy in their rejection of Jesus in terms of Him being one of them. In this **one** point, I am in sympathy with their position. After all is said and done, I think that they are afraid that if Jesus is allowed to be seen as a philosopher, then

they are in trouble. For as He has outshone all other personalities in the field of religion, upon being proclaimed as a philosopher, then what could stop Him from doing likewise there? It is no wonder that they often refuse to admit that Jesus was a philosopher, as indeed He was, at least in the sense that He revealed a new type of philosophy to the world.

Jesus, a philosopher? Yes, He most certainly was! There is enough in the teachings of Jesus to set the mind of any philosopher aflame with the sheer force, magnitude, and truth of it. His is not the dead, lifeless, impenetrable, pessimistic philosophy of some of the contemporary so-called philosophers of today, but is one vitally alive in every aspect of existence both for the present and for the future. One only needs to read the Gospels with an open mind and heart to discover the experiential truth of what I have said.

Several writers have said that Jesus' philosophy was very close to existentialism.²⁶ In the Parable of the Children in the Market Place (Matt. 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35), we see a dramatic example of the existentialist theme. Here, Jesus points to the necessity of decision making. He likens the people of His day, in particular the Pharisees and the lawyers in Luke's account, to children who play in the market place but will not heed the teachings of their companions either John, the ascetic, or Jesus, the joyful man. C.H. Dodd explains this as the "application of the frivolous attitude of

the Jewish public to the words of Jesus and John the Baptist alike.²⁷ Archibald Hunter says that "nothing would please them."²⁸ The parable points to the fact that both Jesus and John had come with messages for the people, but they both had been largely ignored. The implication being that the people should quit gawking and being so critical; to join and play the real game, rather than shouting remarks from the grandstands.²⁹ Ann Childs points out that multitudes of people are doing the same thing today, staying out of the game and using the "irrelevancy of the church" as their excuse.³⁰ The existentialist theme is here in Jesus even before existentialist philosophy as a system of thought ever had been conceived in the human mind.

As another example of this theme, I cite John 8:32, "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." My English composition professor shared with our class the story of his earlier experience with this verse of Scripture. It seems that this particular verse was used as an inscription over the entrance to the library two people were both entering. The other fellow said to the professor, "That is a beautiful sentence." The professor answered him with a statement like, "I quite agree with you, but did you know that it comes from the Bible?" The other man replied that he did not, and the professor proceeded to tell him that these were the words of Jesus, and that this verse is preceded by the words, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples

indeed." After that, the other man began to think that it was not such a beautiful statement, since he was an atheist. When people look at Jesus' teachings for what they say, they are truly beautiful. But, often when they look at them as words of Jesus, people begin to shy away from them to avoid being "religious."

However, the real value of this statement can be seen even without the religious or Christian point of view. The basic theme is the same one that is proclaimed by existentialism, that men and women are free thinking creatures with so much freedom that it can even be frightening to realize just how much freedom one does have. With existentialist philosophy, the only condition to being free is to become aware of that freedom. Jesus, I think, would qualify that freedom in light of knowing Him as the Truth. Of course, this is in direct opposition to the behaviorist psychologists, like B.F. Skinner for instance, who claim that we don't really have any freedom. They look at our actions as only pre-conditioned responses to the stimuli of our environment. In Matthew 5:39, Jesus said, "whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." To this, behaviorism would say, "No, the environmental input would demand instead that the person fight back, and so it would be." Existentialism would contend that the individual would be free to respond in any way at all. But, the one undesirable response would be to say that the individual simply avoid the responsibility of making a decision, for such a response is acting in "bad

faith." Jesus, however, takes the theme of freedom even farther than does the modern existentialist by demonstrating that when one lives in the right relationship to God, then our environment cannot control our every action. Instead, when He sets us free, then we are free to live the joyful, triumphant life of one of God's children even in the face of hardship and tribulations.

Harold Bosley says of Jesus: "He is the author of the oldest known statement of the basic principle of pragmatism, the philosophy of action: 'You will know them by their fruits.'"³¹ At the end of the aforementioned Parable of the Children in the Market Place (Matt. 11:19 and Luke 7:35), Jesus said, "Wisdom is justified of all her children." This is another example of the pragmatic element in Jesus' teachings. The natural application of this colorful short saying of Jesus is that He was pointing out that those who follow the way of truth will be vindicated, and that the consequences of any other course of action will eventually lead to destruction. The concept of wisdom and her children seems larger than just what Jesus was illustrating here, and it is. It almost seems out of place in Jesus' teachings; but there it remains. Since both Matthew and Luke contain this statement, it points to the conclusion that it originated from the "Q document" which was a list of Jesus sayings which is no longer available as a complete document for us to study today.³² To look even farther back at the Jewish wisdom literature, we can

find almost the same statement in one of the Old Testament Apocryphal books, that of Ecclesiasticus or the Words of Jesus Son of Sirach. It reads, "Wisdom exalteth her sons and taketh hold of them that seek her."³³ Perhaps, Jesus Christ was adopting this piece of teaching from the earlier writer, but He does not do so without adapting it to His own position. The only notable difference between the two statements is that Jesus Christ uses children in the place where the other has used sons. Apparently, He had a much more open and friendly attitude toward women than did the earlier writer.

So, centuries before William James was even born, we can see that Jesus was a practitioner of pragmatic philosophy. This philosophy has its limitations, but in the context of Jesus' teachings, it finds a unique usefulness. When He said that, "Wisdom is justified of all her children.", He gave us a test for any system of philosophy. From that which is true wisdom and those who follow its way, we will see flowing the proof of its good and enduring qualities through what it does for mankind. Under this test, Jesus' philosophy surely stands out as a winner. Of course, there have been those who misused His teachings with disastrous results, but when people truly have followed His philosophy mankind has always profited from its application.

Philosophers have shown reluctance in acceptance of Jesus as a philosopher, but they have not been alone in this problem. The

same reluctance has been evident on the part of many individuals working within the realm of theology. The problem here has been that when Jesus is recognized as the Son of God, it is paradoxical to say that He was a philosopher. Philosophers must use what knowledge and wisdom others have used before them in developing their own theories and systems of knowledge. The Orthodox theologian would ask, "How can Jesus the Son of God have anything to do with 'worldly' knowledge and wisdom?" Hence, one must not talk of Jesus as a philosopher because this reduces Him to the same level as ordinary human beings. To say that Jesus was a philosopher would be for them almost, if not complete, heresy.

To resolve this problem is not an altogether difficult undertaking. For the solution is found within one of the primary doctrines of Christian theology itself, that is the Incarnation. For most of the history of Christianity, theologians have proclaimed that Jesus was both God and man. At first, there was no problem in believing that He was God. The problem was in believing that He was a man and especially so with a group known as the "Gnostics". Since that time, there has been a complete reversal in this situation. For, today people who have problems, in respect to the Incarnation, find the difficulty in believing that He was God, not in believing that He was a man. However, the basic belief expressed in the doctrine of the Incarnation is that Jesus was indeed both God and man in some mysterious way.³⁴

Now, if as is expressed in the Incarnational doctrine, we see Jesus as having been divine, then consequently we would see at least part of what He taught as transcendent or as having come down from God. The knowledge and wisdom of Jesus are thus placed in a position of utmost importance, because they have come from God. But, to take the position that all this teaching has come directly from God through Jesus, as some still do, is inadequate, irrational, and unnecessary. Unnecessary, because as Jesus was both human and divine, it necessarily follows that it is only natural that His teachings follow at least partially in the way man has dealt with wisdom. This is in complete consistency with the modern understanding of the Incarnation. Irrational, because there was no reason for Jesus to ignore the vast wealth of the wisdom of those who lived here before Him. Inadequate, because the teachings of Jesus are witnesses to the fact that He did take advantage of the teachings of many of the wise men, prophets, and sages of the ages before Him. This characteristic of Jesus' teachings is so apparent that many scholars have commented on it. Karl Jaspers sums up what others have said in the following statement: "It has been said, rightly perhaps, that there was nothing new in the teachings of Jesus." And further commenting on the use of teachings from thinkers who preceded Jesus, he adds: "He accepted the knowledge of those about him, worked with traditional ideas."³⁵ Jaspers here does not go quite so far as to say that there was nothing new in Jesus' teachings. He does, however,

point out that its very nature is characteristic and repetitive of much of earlier thought.

Other scholars have taken diverse positions in relation to the influence of outside factors upon Jesus and what He taught. Opinion varies in relation to whose evaluation is used. Some Christian thinkers have said what Jaspers come very close to saying, that Jesus didn't say anything new. In other words, as John Hayes reviews the work of Joseph Salvador, a Jewish scholar, we find:

He argued that Jesus never taught a single idea nor laid down any precept that was not to be found in the Jewish scriptures or the writings of the sages contemporary with Jesus. The sermon on the Mount for example was traced back to influence from the book of Ben Sirach.³⁶

Another opinion which comes from an authoritative source, Ernest Scott, is that, "much of Jesus' teaching was anticipated by thinkers before him." In clarification of his viewpoint, Scott states: "It was not his object to formulate an ethic that should be novel in every detail. Whatever impressed him as true and beautiful in the current teaching he gladly made his own."³⁷ We can see how that Jesus certainly did this in the obvious quotations which He took from the Old Testament. What is not so easily seen is that He also took and used in the original form or in a slightly altered form what had been said by others. One may choose to believe any position he or she desires to believe in relation to outer influences on the teachings of Jesus, but either leads to the conclusion that Jesus was a philosopher.

Certainly, there are problems for the philosopher and the Orthodox Christian in classifying Jesus as a philosopher; nevertheless, it can be done. Yet one must realize that we cannot confine Jesus to this classification or to any other one for that matter. Trying to gain a full understanding of any individual by the use of a single classification according to a certain role is hardly possible. One person may fill many roles, such as father, husband, student, factory worker, and citizen. No single one of these classifications alone can give us the full picture of the unique individual. Neither can we fully comprehend Jesus by saying that He was a philosopher; this was only one of the many roles that He filled. This term or any other term simply fails to capture the essence of Jesus. It would be like building a cage for a wild beast such as a tiger or lion out of match sticks. We could not expect this cage to be able to contain the wild beast, nor could we realistically expect to confine the personality of Jesus within the concept of any one classification. It is impossible. Yes, we may truly say that Jesus was a philosopher, but to stop there is a ghastly mistake.

In the words of one writer, "We have tried to fit Jesus into some abstract scheme."³⁸ In thinking of Jesus as a philosopher, one must be aware of the danger of losing the image of the person, Jesus, within the intellectual idea of Him as a philosopher. Surely, He was a philosopher. Some people have recognized this and

others unfortunately have not. On the other hand, some people have thought of Him as only a carpenter, who lived long ago. Josh McDowell in his fascinating little book, More Than A Carpenter, points out in the title and throughout the book that Jesus may well have been a carpenter, but that He was also much more than a simple carpenter.³⁹ In the same manner, it is important to know that Jesus was a philosopher; but it is imperative to know that He was much, much more than a philosopher.

Footnotes

- ¹John H. Hayes, Son of God to Superstar (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976).
- ²William E. Kinnick, "Philosophy," Collier's Encyclopedia (U.S.A.: Crowell-Collier Educational Corporation, 1968) p.701.
- ³Jules A. Delanghe, The Philosophy of Jesus; Real Love (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1973) p.1.
- ⁴Webster's New World Dictionary, ed. David B. Guralnik (Nashville: Southwestern Company, 1972) p. 558.
- ⁵Kinnick.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸Bertrand Russell, A History of Philosophy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945) p. xxiii.
- ⁹Samuel M. Thompson, The Nature of Philosophy (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961) p. 24.
- ¹⁰"Sunday School Lesson," The Robesonian, 10 Jan. 1980, p.5.
- ¹¹A.K. Bierman, "Is Religion Religion?" in Jacob Needleman, A.K. Bierman, and James A. Gould, eds., Religion for a New Generation (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977) p.46.
- ¹²Henry Thomas, Understanding the Great Philosophers (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1962) p. 9.
- ¹³Webster's.
- ¹⁴Karl Jaspers, The Great Philosophers, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962) p. 85.
- ¹⁵J. Donald Butler, Four Philosophies and Their Practice in Education and Religion (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951) p. 546.
- ¹⁶Harvey Branscomb, The Message of Jesus (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1926) p. 25.
- ¹⁷Jerry Adler, "The Faces of Jesus," Newsweek, 24 Dec. 1979, p.51.

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¹⁸F.F. Bruce, Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974). p. 118.

¹⁹Samuel Enoch Stumpf, Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966).

²⁰John Franklin Genung, The Hebrew Literature of Wisdom (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906) p. 20.

²¹William Barclay, And Jesus Said: A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970) pp. 11-12.

²²Josiah Royce, Sources of Religious Insight (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912).

²³Edward W. Bauman, The Life and Teaching of Jesus (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) p. 90.

²⁴Ernest F. Scott, The Ethical Teachings of Jesus (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941) p. 126.

²⁵William Hordern, A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1955) p. 124.

²⁶Bauman, p. 128 and Louis Cassels, The Real Jesus: How He lived and What He taught (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. 1968) p. 67.

²⁷C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the King (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961) p. 88.

²⁸Archibald M. Hunter, Interpreting the Parables (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) p. 77.

²⁹Albert E. Barnett, Understanding the Parables of Our Lord (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940) pp. 32-33.

³⁰Ann Taylor Childs, Parables to the Point (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) p. 96.

³¹Harold Bosley, The Deeds of Christ (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969) p. 15.

³²Scott, p. 11.

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³³The Modern Reader's Bible ed. Richard G. Moulton (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940) p. 960.

³⁴Hordern, pp. 11-12.

³⁵Jaspers, p. 87.

³⁶Hayes, p. 27.

³⁷Scott, p. 17.

³⁸Ralph T. Morton, Jesus: Man for Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970) p. 121.

³⁹Josh McDowell, More Than a Carpenter (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977).

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