

WEBSTER C. MUCK

A Review Essay: The Life of Christ

For 75 years, from the time I took New Testament Survey at Wheaton College under Edith Torrey in the mid-30s, until I retired from teaching in the early 70s, no year passed without my reading a half-dozen books on the Life of Christ. As a matter of fact, my retirement didn't change that. A couple of months ago, I finished reading Walter Wangerin's *The Book of God*, which is a novel covering the entire Bible, and which devotes the last 200 pages to the New Testament. And I'm now waiting for Anne Rice to finish her three-volume set on *Christ the Lord*. I've read the first two volumes and will read the third when it comes off the press.

Long ago, I started classifying the lives of Christ I read. There were lives of Christ that were mere lists of dates and events. These lacked personality. There were, at the other end of the spectrum, those that were written solely to express disdain: I rejected these as demonstrations of spiteful malice. Frederick Nietzsche fell into this category. His idealizing of the Superman was a worship of power; Jesus dared to describe himself as 'meek and lowly of heart,' and Nietzsche flew into a cold rage at such a display.

Closely associated with this type of presentation is that of Sigmund Freud, who wrote in his *Future of an Illusion* that any type of religion was infantile and unworthy. Freud's analysis renders any kind of human life abnormal. For example, if you are characteristically late to everything, you are dilatory; if you are ten minutes early for all events, you are an eager beaver; if you are always on time, you are compulsive. You can't win through to normalcy because there is no such a thing! Perhaps that was because Freud's data base was his own patients, of whom he used a dozen or so to set up his theories.

The latest release of books from the Crossings book club has two rehearsals of the Life of Christ. One is a sorting of the gospel data into chronological order; the other is a coffee table book that adds art to history from the American Bible Society. The first, by Ed Stewart, compiler, and titled *Jesus 365: Experiencing the Four Gospels as One Single Story* is not the way

the church down through the ages has read the story of Christ's life. Stewart homogenizes the data; the people of God have savored the differences.

Garry Wills has taken a different path than Stewart, a path more in line with the history of the church's interpretations. In his *Life of Christ (What the Gospels Meant)* he quotes Raymond E. Brown's rendition of the passion of Christ (*A Crucified Christ in Holy Week*) where Brown deals with the demand that all the strands of the Gospels be woven together: "When these different Passion narratives are read side by side, one should not be upset by the contrast or ask which view of Jesus is more correct: the Marcan Jesus, who plumbs the depth of abandonment only to be vindicated; the Lucan Jesus, who worries about others and gently dispenses forgiveness; or the Johannine Jesus, who reigns victoriously from the cross in control of all that happens. All three are given to us by the inspiring Spirit, and no one of them exhausts the meaning of Jesus. A true picture of the whole emerges only because the views of it are different. To choose one portrait of the crucified Jesus, in a manner that would exclude the other portrayals, or to harmonize all the Gospel portrayals into one, would deprive the cross of much of its meaning. It is important that some be able to see the head bowed in dejection, while others observe the arms outstretched in forgiveness, and still others perceive in the title on the cross the proclamation of a reigning King." And Wills eloquently ends his book by answering his own question: "How to read the Gospels? As a whole, with the reverence they derive from and address, yet with the intelligence God gave us to help us find him."

I cannot read a *Life of Christ* rapidly. Usually, I read a book in tempo with its type: I skim a book until it has proved that it deserves the respect of careful reading. Some chapters can be exhausted by reading the first and the last paragraphs. With some books I read no more than the publisher's blurb, the introduction, and the preface; then I know it has no interest for me and I return it to the shelf whence I took it. But the majority of the *Lives of Christ*, even those written by authors who despised the Nazarene, I read slowly. I know of no other class of literature I approach in this fashion, and I have never bothered to ask *why*.

I read each volume of the *Life of Christ* with a sense of the author's presence. That varies: I approach G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* with a different mind-set than I bring to Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene*. To neither one am I rejecting; I simply itemize what I think they will bring to the subject-matter and then verify my expectation. In a sense, I do that with all books, but I do it more intentionally with these books than with any other genre.

One fact on which all the *Lives of Christ* agree is that Jesus was born and lived in poverty. Anne Rice at the close of her first volume on the life of Christ (*Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*) imagines Mary speaking to Jesus after his visit to the Temple when he was 12: "And now you come home with us

to Nazareth. Not back to the Temple. Oh, I know how much you want to stay at the Temple. I know. But no. The Lord in Heaven did not send you to the house of a teacher in the Temple or a priest in the Temple or a scribe or a rich Pharisee. He sent you to Joseph bar Jacob, the carpenter, and his betrothed, Mary of the Tribe of David in Nazareth. And you come home to Nazareth with us.”

I have never lived in poverty, so I do not know from experience what it is to be poor or what it is not to know when I’m going to get my next meal. I have read much about such things. For example, Rudyard Kipling, in his book on the half-Irish, half-Indian *Kim*, relates that Kim always wanted to be with his impoverished friends rather than his high-placed English acquaintances during the vacations. For Kim, the fellowship of the poor was vastly superior to life among middle-class British.

Which brings me to the question, What do I do with these Lives of Christ? They say to me:

Love as Jesus loved;
Intend with the mind-set Jesus used;
Respond to others as Jesus responded.

For a while, some suggested that we use the question, *What would Jesus do?* as a clearinghouse for our behavior. But Jesus lived 2000 years ago. His ideas of hygiene do not accord with ours. His cultural patterns clash with those of the 20th century. His dress would set him apart from those who wear jeans and T-shirts. His sandals would be ill-suited to Minnesota snow.

Jesus himself left us in no doubt. **Love.** “A new command I give you,” he said [John 15.12]. It is the urgency and the emphasis that are new, for the form of the command goes back to the law of Moses; indeed it goes back to the nature of God.

Paul called it “a far better way.” His description of the way of love is sublime: [1 Cor 13.1-13]

“If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

“If I speak God’s word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain ‘Jump,’ and it jumps, but I don’t love I’m nothing.

“If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere.

“So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.

“Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self.

“Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut.

“Love doesn’t have a swelled head, doesn’t force itself on

others, isn't always 'me first,' doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel.

"Loves takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.

"Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

"When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like an infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright. We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

"But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us to that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love." (Eugene Peterson's paraphrase)

As to the **intentions** Jesus brought to his life, they, too, come clear in the majority of those who write his life. Echoing Isaiah, and rebuking the imperialist aims of his disciples, Jesus told them: [Matt 25.24-28]

"You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, how quickly a little power goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held in hostage."

Jesus was under no illusions. He came to earth to die. In perhaps the greatest drama of all time—maybe of all eternity—he employed death to defeat Death. The road he took to the Cross was the road of servitude. His choice was deliberate; he knew what he was doing. I wonder: when did it come clear to him? Anne Rice thinks it was on his way home from the episode at the Temple when he was 12. Wangerin suggests that it was during the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. I think it was when he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." That's the King James; *The Message* renders it, "When it came close to the time for his Ascension, he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem."

I like the way Anne Rice sets the contrast: "In sum, the whole case for the

non-divine Jesus who stumbled into Jerusalem and somehow got crucified by nobody and had nothing to do with the founding of Christianity and would be horrified by it if he knew about it — that whole picture which had floated in the liberal circles I frequented as an atheist for 30 years — that case was not made.”

And why was it not made? “He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” I have a great deal of sympathy with Thomas who reacted to this stubbornness with unbelieving loyalty: [John 11.16] “Come along. We might as well die with him.” Jesus’ recognition that he must die, and his determination to do so as Jewish scripture predicted form a watershed for those who write the story of his life.

I first moved out of this unbelieving loyalty to an understanding that Christ went to the Cross with deliberation when I was in college. I was reading G. Campbell Morgan’s *The Crises of the Christ*. When it came to the story of the Transfiguration, [Luke 9.28-36] the topic of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was “the decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.” That’s the King James Version. None of the modern versions captures the force of King James, which emphasizes the awkwardness of a man’s *accomplishing* his death. I was so struck by this that, later, I preached on it. My congregation was not enthralled by my sermon: several thought I should stick to topics that were less strange.

At 93 years of age I view my death as imminent, but I do not consider it an accomplishment. It will be a nuisance, but I do not seek either to hasten it or delay it. Since I don’t have a vote in the matter, I don’t waste energy contemplating it. But Christ had a different intention about his death. In the passage about the good shepherd, [John 10.1-21] he says:

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them too. They’ll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one shepherd. That is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down: I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father”

I sympathize with Jesus’ disciples’ confusion at such words. Nor has the confusion lessened a great deal over the years. For example, who are the “other sheep” our Lord is referring to? Are they the Muslims? Are they those who, not having heard, have yet believed?

But consider, not what he is not saying, but what he is saying: he is asserting his ownership: “My own sheep.” I am comforted by Jesus’ insistence that he knows his sheep and calls them by name. I do not plumb the depths of such knowledge. I understand why my farmer uncles and aunts forbade their children to name any of the animals that were destined to end up on the dining room table. “I couldn’t eat a bite that noon,” one of my cousins told me. “I had named that hen and she came when I called her. I cried when she was killed.”

Cosmically, I do not know how literally I may take the Psalmist [-147.4] when he sings praise to the Lord who “Counts the stars and assigns each a name.”

But Jesus knows my name, and yours, and promises to care for us.

When Jesus says that he has the right to lay down his life as well as to take it up again, he parts company with us. We do not have such control. Nor do I want it. Jesus had to choose between what he wanted and what was the will of his Father. It was not an easy choice, and the conclusion was never foregone. We should never read a life of Christ and confuse the possession of “all power” with “being carried to the sky on flow’ry beds of ease!”

We come to the third use of the Life of Christ genre of literature. It is to **respond** to others as Jesus responded. This includes both loving and intending. It excludes, as we have seen, the accidents of how he dressed and conducted his manner of life.

The essence of the Godhead is love, as John the apostle said [I John 4.17-18]

“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ’s. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.”

When one’s view of God does not put love first, that misconception leads to such events as the Inquisition, the Holocaust, and American slavery, or, indeed, any kind of slavery. The Inquisition was performed by organized Christianity that thought that righteousness could be achieved by punishment. That was the same mind-set that prompted George Bush to bomb Iraq. The Holocaust was Hitler’s idea of ridding society of the Jews; his public relations justification was that he was doing Germany a favor. And the American South considered that an enslaved Negro was God’s notion of a proper society.

Jesus said, of those who crucified him, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” I think his prayer overrode that of those who crucified him, who said, “His death be on us and on our children.” Jesus

promised the repentant thief, “You will be with me in Paradise.” He acted with total disregard to the ritual laws that would make him unclean by touching bleeding women, lepers, and dead bodies.

We adopt Jesus’ perspective in the parable of the Good Samaritan, that the sight of bleeding, damaged victims stirs compassion. Therefore we will join in the singing of that new song that the Apostle John foresaw in his vision of our final society: [Rev 5.9-10]

“You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men and women for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

He’s talking about us.

Webster C. Muck is professor of psychology emeritus at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota.