

DECONSTRUCTING JESUS, OR THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BRUCE

(On Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An intimate biography*
New York &c.: Image Books, Doubleday, 2002 [2000])

by
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A Christmas diversion

I came across Bruce Chilton's book during a recent trip, where I had an overlay of several hours in Denver, Colo., and used the time to inspect the airport's book collections. The title struck a chord within me: of course Jesus had been a rabbi just like the other rabbis (such as Hillel, Gamliel, Shammai) whose *qabbaloth* I had been studying in my Hebrew class at the University of Texas just a few months earlier. I had been struck by the similarity of their teaching and the parables and sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, and now this book offered itself as a welcome complement to my studies. In addition, some rave reviews by both Protestant and Catholic readers, quoted on the back cover, made me put this book on my Christmas wish list, and I used my spare time during the recent vacation to begin what I assumed would be a sheer reading pleasure. Little did I know...

As it happened, it didn't quite turn out the way I had foreseen. Much of my holiday was spent, as expected, in reading Chilton's book and making notes in the margin; but also, my reading became more and more critical as I advanced in Chilton's narrative. As it was, I experienced a growing frustration and irritation, and the best way of getting rid of those negative feelings seemed to me, as always, to have it out on paper. So rather than gnashing my nails and pulling my hair, I set out to write the critical, but also appreciative, review of Bruce Chilton's work that follows below.

Story or history?

One of the quotes on the back cover of Chilton's book expresses the feeling that '*Rabbi Jesus* is a scholarly pursuit which ... reads more like a novel' (from a review in the Durham, N.C., newspaper *Herald-Sun*). Perhaps the problem with the book is exactly that: it pretends to be a scholarly work, with all the trappings of the scholarly apparatus: footnotes, notes to the individual chapters, detailed references, both to Scriptural and other quoted literature, an extensive bibliography, several indexes (to sources and to subjects), and acknowledgments (both professional and personal). On the other hand, the work has a decidedly novelistic character: the persons are quoted in direct discourse (often in what was supposed to be the original language of the words spoken, Hebrew or Aramaic), and they are attributed thoughts and feelings both in indirect and free indirect discourse; in other words, they are given 'voices', just as in the case of a regular novel. (On the concept of 'voice', see Mey 2000, Part II).

The quotes are sometimes obtained from the official, recognized sources (such as the texts of the Prophets, the Psalms, or the Gospels, often quoted in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), sometimes they are the invention of the author (as when the young Jesus is told off by the authorities 'when he strayed near the Temple': "Get out, boy!" (*Phaq, tabya!*)' (p. 36). Here, the Aramaic words are due to the author, not to any contemporary source, just as the whole episode is a novelistic recasting of the well-known episode in the Bible where Jesus at the age of 12 remains behind in Jerusalem after his family has left to return for Bethlehem – with the added difference that when 'Jesus disappeared into the crowd', his family (i.e. Mary, since Joseph already had passed away, according to Chilton) 'would not see him for several years' (p. 32).

The problem with the episode referred to above, as well as with the 'original' citations, is that neither are attested in any way; in fact, they expressly contradict the narrative as we know it from Luke in chapter 2:51, where it is said that 'he went down with them and came to Nazareth'. In addition, where the Gospel tells us that Jesus was twelve years old, when he went to Jerusalem with his family (for Passover; Luke 2:41), Chilton makes this journey happen at age 14 (or

even 16), on a pilgrimage to the holy city on the occasion of the feast of the Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). And when Jesus, according to the author, flees Jerusalem, where he has no prospects of eking out a living as a homeless beggar, and tries to find John the Baptist in the Jordan wilderness in order to begin an apprenticeship with him, he is portrayed as an adolescent of 16, whereas John is said to be his elder: 'He [Jesus] could quickly identify the rabbi [John], twenty-seven by the time Jesus met him, wild-looking, with a scraggly beard and long hair matted into dreads' (p. 41).

Here, too, Chilton (by his own admission elsewhere) 'must contradict the chronology of Luke' (p. 34): in Luke, chapter 1, the story is told how John's mother, Elizabeth, had miraculously conceived after her husband Zacharias' encounter with the angel Gabriel (1:24), how her relative, Mary, came to visit her from Nazareth, pregnant herself, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's gestation, and how Elizabeth's 'babe leaped in [her] womb for joy' (1:44; New King James version) – all of which makes John and Jesus almost of the same age, the former merely a couple of months, and not a full fourteen or sixteen years older.

As Chilton remarks, this manipulation of the chronology is necessary, 'in order to explain how Jesus came to John' (p. 34), and to motivate his claim that Jesus indeed had an apprenticeship with John for a number of years in the 'hidden period' – the years in Nazareth about which the Gospels are silent. The question here is of course how legitimate it is to defend an historical claim with partly made-up and manipulated historical 'facts'. It is as if the author has formed a ready-made idea of what happened to Jesus, and then proceeds to construct the evidence around it, often contradicting the traditional sources and whatever factual evidence can be found there. To corroborate his own so-called evidence, he adduces 'quotes' from self-invented sources, and tries to authenticate them by providing an 'original' text, in most cases a fragment of Aramaic due to Chilton (who is a reputed scholar of Aramaic himself). However, no matter how superb one's credentials, it won't do to self-produce an 'original' text. This is exactly what in archeology is called 'to salt the dig', i.e. introduce into the site matters that are supposed to be authentically ancient and prior to the timeline of the excavations, as when Chilton puts the (self-translated) Aramaic text of the Lord's Prayer into Jesus' mouth (pp. 22, 297). However

plausible such a translation may be, and notwithstanding the fact that Jesus (in accordance with the historical facts and the Biblical sources) normally spoke in Aramaic (as did everybody else among the Jewish population of Palestine at that time), such a translation remains a posterior artifact, not a piece of historical evidence.

Jesus the outcast

A similar 'post hoc' reconstruction of history has to do with the way Chilton portrays the young Jesus' relations with his family and the people of his village, Nazareth. Jesus is seen as an outcast, a person who has to flee the community where he naturally belongs, because, as Chilton says, there are doubts about his paternity, leading to an exclusion from the synagogue (to the extent that he is not even allowed in for his father Joseph's funeral rites; p. 21). These doubts all have somehow to do with Jesus' alleged birth of a virgin, a problem that has bedeviled theologians, historians, and others as long as the Gospels have been read and commented upon.

However, the evidence that Chilton builds his case on is scant, to say the least. He casts Jesus in the role of a *mamzer*, a person with an unclear line of heritage, and in practice subscribes to the much later folk theory (as attested in the Talmud) that Jesus should have been 'born of fornication' (p. 7),¹ perhaps even the result of Mary's one-night stand with some Roman soldier (p. 8; on Mary's supposed 'promiscuity', see below).

The problem with Jesus' birth, according to the author, was not that he was born before his parents were married, but that his mother Mary had indulged in 'sex with the wrong person' (p. 13): Joseph was 'a man outside her [Mary's] own community' (ibid.), and therefore her offspring's identity could not be established. A person with such a cloudy line of descent was what was called a *mamzer*, an outcast, who was not allowed to participate in the religious and social life of the community. In short, Jesus was 'ostracized' in Nazareth, looked upon 'with judgment and distaste' (p. 34), so he had to get out and find himself another walk of life. And this is how he decided to become a disciple of John the Baptist, and commence an apprenticeship that

lasted some four years or so, according to Chilton, during which time Jesus was part of John's community of disciples, wandering about the countryside and preaching the baptism of cleansing. He only returned to Galilee after John was taken prisoner and killed at the orders of King Antipas upon the instigation of Herodias, his second wife (cf. Matthew 14).

To construct this picture of Jesus as an outsider, one who had to leave home to escape the judgmental looks of his fellow villagers, Chilton mounts an impressive framework, based on the fact (as he wants us to believe) that Joseph was not from Bethlehem in Judea, but from another Bethlehem, a village about 7 miles away from Nazareth, where he lived as a 'journeyman', not a carpenter (p. 6), and had been married, with children of his own. When he and Mary met, 'they broke with custom and slept together soon after meeting and well before their marriage was publicly recognized' (pp. 6-7).

To make this assumption more plausible, Chilton has Joseph live in (Galilean) Bethlehem, not Nazareth, and take his pregnant wife to this Bethlehem in order to escape the 'wagging tongues' of Nazareth's inhabitants (p. 7). In other words, Chilton implicitly denies the account given in Luke 2, where Joseph's and Mary's journey to (Judean) Bethlehem is motivated by the 'decree of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered' (2:1). However, the Gospel never tells us that Joseph lived in any 'Bethlehem' (irrespective of location); he traveled to the Judean Bethlehem to fulfill a civic obligation (as enforced by the Roman authorities under severe penalties of one or the other kind). I see absolutely no reason (and Chilton gives none) to discard Luke's time-honored and carefully dated account of Joseph's travel in favor of this undocumented change of venue, notwithstanding Chilton's assertion that there is 'good reason' to believe that Matthew's Bethlehem was the 'far more logical Bethlehem of Galilee' (pp. 7, 9).

Moreover, the author's exercise of Biblical scholarship in 'proving' that Jesus was not recognized as Joseph's son is less than satisfactory. He bases himself on a passage from Mark (6:3), where it is said (when Jesus makes his first public appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth): 'Is this not the son of Mary?' Chilton interprets this as implying: 'not Joseph's son' (p. 6). But this goes against the record of the same event in Matthew (13:55), where the bystanders asked: 'Is this not the

carpenter's son?' The fact that the text adds: 'Is not his mother called Mary?' does in no way imply a denial of Joseph's paternity, as Chilton wants us to believe, among other things by omitting the reference to Matthew. After all, a child has a father *and* a mother; and having the one does not exclude also having the other. In addition, Chilton's exegesis of the passage in Mark as meaning: 'not Joseph's son' explicitly contradicts what one reads in Luke 4:22, where the people in the synagogue ask the (rhetorical) question: 'Is this not Joseph's son?' Such manipulations of the Gospel text do not add to the author's credibility as a Biblical scholar.

Deconstructing Jesus

Chilton builds his 'deconstructed' Jesus to a large extent on the latter's assumed status as an 'illiterate *mamzer*' (p. 99; cf. the title of his first chapter 'A Mamzer from Galilee'). But (as I intimated above) such a claim is wholly without foundation in the extant sources having to do with Jesus' life and works. Any understanding of Jesus as a revolutionary should build on concrete evidence from the sources. This should not be difficult, given the character of his teaching; however, any appeals to undocumented influences or personality traits on the part of Jesus (Chilton even goes as far as to characterize Jesus as a person with a 'bipolar' condition, p. 104; to attribute a 'shamanic role' to him, p. 111; or even to call him a 'carousing drunkard', p. 131) lack documentary status.

The same goes for efforts at humanizing Jesus' person by describing him in details that could not possibly be attested, and besides, are so general that they apply to almost anybody at some stage of his or her life, as when Chilton tells us on p. 225 that Jesus, on his final entry into Jerusalem, 'was years away from the ease of Capernaum, and many meals short of the hospitality he had enjoyed there. His paunch was gone' (the paunch in question had been said to 'emerge' earlier; cf. p. 138, where Jesus also is said to have been 'shorter than the norm, overweight, and tending to baldness'). Such a description of Jesus, with all its humanizing attributions, is pure literary fabrication, and has nothing to do with an historical account, despite

Chilton's implicit claim to have provided exactly that, based on 'what is attested about his appearance and from what we can gather from the likely results of his lifestyle' (p. 138; yet another highly subjective evaluation).

In contrast, once one accepts that *Rabbi Jesus* is *not* an effort at a truthful description of an historical person's life, much good can be said about Chilton's book. The amount of background information about life in Galilee at the times of Jesus, as well as the author's pictorial (not to say picturesque) description of the country and its inhabitants, their daily lives and business, the relationship between the occupying Romans and the Jews, who try to hold on to the religious and social traditions which had constituted the fabric of their existence for hundreds of years, is not only impressive, but also extremely well documented by its inclusion of other contemporary and later sources (such as the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' works).

I learned a lot, just to take one example, about the status of Pontius Pilate, his rise and fall in the twilight of Palestine-based Jewish society and life, and how his relations with the Jewish religious authorities were always a matter of instant, almost improvised negotiation, whose results could go one way or the other, as in the case of Jesus' judgment itself (see pp. 201ff.). Or take the elaborate references to the way the High Priest we know as Caiphas ('Caiaphas' in Chilton's rendition of the Hebrew name) went about his business of overseeing 'the logistics of sacrifice' and the 'stringent ritual routines' (p. 214) of the feasts in the Temple, complete with a detailed description of the layout of the altar and the 'choreography of the sacrifice' (p. 218) under the direction of the High Priest. Such a description is certainly a far cry from the usual demeaning picture of the individual Caiphas and his role in the process against Jesus, and thus forms a useful and necessary antidote against much of the devotionalist and biased writing that has had (and still has) currency among many Christians and Christian hagiographers and chroniclers.

The legendary Jesus

Chilton's book, in addition to being 'one heck of a good read', as the *National Catholic Reporter* characterizes it (quoted on the back cover), definitely deserves our attention as a free paraphrase of the life of Jesus, presented with the intention of enhancing, not diminishing, the importance and attraction given to this fascinating person, no matter how one chooses to categorize him: as a simple 'son of man' (the corresponding Hebrew expression *ben adam* denotes 'a human being', neither more nor less; see further below) or as a divine manifestation. But such a paraphrase can be (and should be) read 'more like a novel' (as the same back cover tells us) than as an historically correct account of the facts. In this sense, *Rabbi Jesus* is close to the medieval genre of 'legend', that is, a partly fictional account of the lives of saints and their miraculous doings. It is likewise related to similar, modern interpretations of Jesus' life and works, such as are due to authors like the Swedish Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf in her *Christ Legends* (1904), or the Italian author Giovanni Papini in his *Witnesses of the Passion* (1932), or even the Russian physician-novelist Mikhail A. Bulgakov, in the first chapter of his posthumous surrealist novel *The Master and Margarita* (1966).²

By contrast, Chilton's revision of the Bible creates a modern legend, a kind of anti-gospel. The divergent character of this 'Gospel according to Bruce', as I am tempted to call it, is nowhere more discernible than in the way our evangelist (who is a priest in the Anglican Church) treats the supernatural element in Jesus' mission. For Chilton, miracles are there to be explained away. As an instance, consider his re-telling of the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-12) on pages 182-185. The changing of water into wine is interpreted as a kind of afterthought on the part of John (which is said to occur 'much [sic] later in the text'; p. 184); the 'incident at Kana' (p. 185) is given a purely 'anagogic' meaning, to use a term dear to St. John Chrysostom, and is stripped of its miraculous properties. In a similar vein, the raising of Lazarus from the dead in John, chapter 11, is attributed by Chilton to 'Jesus' miraculous [sic] capacity to discover life in people whom others had given up for dead' (p. 246). Any country doctor with

some years of experience could have performed such a 'miracle', if we are to believe Chilton's exegesis.

When it comes to explaining what happened in the period from the Crucifixion to the Ascension, in particular the Resurrection itself, the author proceeds with the utmost caution, navigating between the Scylla of unconditional belief à la Thomas the Apostle, and the Charybdis of a laicizing interpretation à la Ernest Renan in his 1863 *Vie de Jésus*. The result, for all the author's efforts, is closer to the latter, though: Jesus is a human being who goes through stages to his final transformation: 'from *mamzer* to *talmid* [a student, scil. of John the Baptist's], to rabbi, to messianic exorcist, to *chasid* [a 'practicing saint', more or less], to prophet, and now to angel' (p. 281). No amount of hand-waving on the part of the author can undo this reductionist effect. Compare: 'As long as we fail to grasp that the resurrection was an angelic, nonmaterial affair, these accounts [of the appearances of the risen Christ] will continue to confound us' (p. 285). But a view like this says nothing about what really happened in those forty days from Resurrection to Ascension, except in terms of metaphor and 'angelic events'. Now angels are active throughout the books of both the Old and the New Testament, so that declaring something to be an 'angelic event' is tantamount to attributing the event in question to some external, undisclosed, non-material cause, and we still have to ask who was behind it all.

Conversely, Chilton emphasizes the human character of this 'Son of Man': Jesus is depicted as a 'normal' human being, with bursts of temper, fits of depression, moments of despondency, but also one who savors the good life, 'wining and dining' in Galilee, as Chilton has it. This good life extends even into an area of human activity that we normally do not associate with the person of Jesus: that of the other sex. Chilton builds a sort of case for Jesus having had sexual relations with a woman, Mary of Magdala, whom he had exorcised repeatedly, maybe up to seven times (cf. Luke 8:2 and pp. 144-145). Chilton remarks that 'there is no evidence that Jesus did or did not enjoy sexual contact during his life, but seven-demoned Miriam remains the most likely candidate if he did so, ...' (p. 145) and continues with an innuendo, letting the disciples ask: 'Where is the rabbi, absent so late in the celebration? With seven-demoned Miriam. Again.' (ibid.) Here, we

are definitely in the domain of folk legend, as practiced by another contemporary 'deconstructionist' author, the Swedish Marxist Sven Wernström, in his *Comrade Jesus*, where Jesus is portrayed as gallivanting and cavorting, unabashedly and unblushingly, with the erstwhile sinner, the same Mary Magdalen; after all, as Chilton remarks, 'sexual contact with an unmarried woman who was not a virgin, particularly a sinner or a formerly demon-possessed person, did not fall under the definition of adultery or seduction' (p. 145). Here, the steed is definitely out of the barn.

Facts and footnotes

If, on balance, I evaluate Chilton's attempt at giving us a more even-handed, contemporarily acceptable picture of Jesus as failed, it is precisely because, although presenting this picture in a novelistic palette, he also pretends to furnish a document that is conform with the highest scientific standards of reliability and accuracy. Adding a scholarly apparatus, however, to what is basically a novel, only obfuscates the issues and muddles the genre that we are dealing with. One cannot heighten the truth value of one's historical statements by cloaking them in a novelistic garb. Conversely, one cannot improve the status of one's belletristic writings by providing them with footnotes and other devices in an intention to inject a modicum of factual accuracy into what is essentially a fictional account.

In addition, as I have shown above on several occasions, the internal coherence and textual consistency of the account are not always beyond critique. Here, too, one should note that Chilton's work is marred by a number of irregularities on the pedestrian level of textual accuracy. There are what I interpret as orthographic errors or possibly typos, such as 'lay seige' for 'lay siege' (p. 111), 'Gezirim' for 'Gerizim' (the mountains; p. 70), 'synogogue' for 'synagogue' (p. 126), 'Eusebuis' for 'Eusebius' (p. 272), 'exegesit' for 'exegesis' (p. 298) and so on. There is also the inconsistent transliteration of the final Hebrew *tav* as either *-t* or *-th* (*passim*). The author should perhaps review his German grammar: on p. 74, he quotes 'German scholars' as having called the period in Jesus' life spent in Nazareth prior to his missions

'*die galiläische Frühling*, the Galilean springtime' (italics original); unfortunately, 'springtime in Germany' is, and has always been, masculine: *der Frühling*.

As to more content-related matters, one wonders about the confusion between a 'Nazirite' (a person who has taken a vow of not shaving and practices also other methods of self-abnegation in the service of the Divine; cf. also p. 287) and a 'Nazarene' (an inhabitant of Nazareth). On p. 273, the words of the Angel addressing the women who are looking in the tomb for the body of the risen Jesus are rendered as 'You seek Yeshua the crucified Nazirite', without any explanation being offered for this innovative rendering of Mark 16:6 (where the standard translations all have 'Nazarene'). Here, Chilton could probably defend himself by appealing to the traditional rabbinical ways of quoting Scripture (best characterized by the slogan 'anything goes', as long as it sounds minimally correct and serves its function of edifying the audience); and indeed, chapter 2 of Matthew furnishes us with many examples of exactly the same kind of tendentious (mis-)quoting. In particular, with reference to the above, in Matthew 2:23 it is said that 'he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets "He shall be called a Nazarene"' (to be understood as the prophetic 'a Nazirite'; New King James version).³

The discussion on p. 285 with regard to the way Paul relates his experience on the road to Damascus (Galatians 1:16: '... it pleased God ... to reveal his Son in me') and the argument that Chilton builds for a more correct interpretation of the text as 'to reveal his son *to* me' (p. 285; italics in original) fall through on theological, as well as philological grounds; it suffers from an overly restricted understanding of the Greek preposition *eis* as necessarily translated as 'to', not 'in' (compare that to express the act 'to believe in God', the Greek text has *pistenein eis ton Theon*, using a Greek preposition that normally means 'to', as opposed to *en*, 'in').

Another aspect of Chilton's theology gives me trouble: the way he interprets an expression often used by Jesus to refer to himself, 'Son of Man', as carrying the implicit connotations invoked by the same expression in the book of Daniel. As is well known, in chapter 7, Daniel describes his 'nightly vision' (that is, a dream) of the four 'beasts'

coming up from the ocean and threatening the world; but they are defeated by a fifth appearance, one who was 'like a son of man' (*ke-var enosh* in Aramaic; Daniel 7:13)⁴. Whatever the significance of the vision (this 'son of Man' shall reign over the world after having defeated all the worldly kingdoms, as it is explained by an angel to Daniel in the sequel), one cannot immediately assume that every occurrence of the words 'son of man' in the Bible refers to Daniel and his vision.

As I pointed out before, the Hebrew *ben adam* (or its Aramaic equivalent *bar enosh*) is used throughout the Bible, and also later, in the sense of a universalizing, indefinite pronoun, a bit like our 'one'. Many languages have similar expressions; the German *man* is etymologically derived from the word for 'man' (German *Mann*); in Czech, the word *člověk* ('human being, Man') is frequently used to link the content of an utterance to no one in particular, or maybe to oneself in a modest fashion (e.g. a current expression like 'one never knows' would in Czech be rendered as *člověk nikdy neví*, literally 'a man never knows not', with the double negation typical for Slavic languages). And even though Jesus occasionally refers to Daniel (as Chilton points out on p. 159), the mention of the 'abomination of desolation standing in the holy place' (Daniel 12:11), explicitly quoted in the New Testament by both Matthew and Mark with reference to 'the prophet Daniel' (Matthew 25:15; Mark 13:14) should not be taken as endorsing this identification of Jesus with Daniel's 'Son of Man', as Chilton does repeatedly. Apart from reflecting a general eschatological longing among the Jews of Jesus' time, and a desire to know that at the end of their times, there was something better to hope for (which explains the popularity of Daniel's vision and its prophetic ending),⁵ there is nothing that links Jesus specifically to this interpretation of the words 'son of man'; Jesus uses the expression mainly to underscore his human nature as being real, albeit distinct from the divine.

Coda: Chilton's Gospel

Bruce Chilton has an agenda, as I stated in the beginning. The point of his book is to give us a picture of Jesus placed in the historical and local context – a picture that is radically different from the one we

know from the four Gospels, but supposedly more acceptable to a modern reader. Chilton rewrites the New Testament by creating a Jesus *persona* that closely resembles a contemporary rebel, full of *Sturm und Drang*, whose self-realization as a prophet is subject to modern afflictions such as bipolarity and depression. Chilton's Jesus subscribes to our own visions of the 'good life' as centered around sex and cuisine (but not fitness), and likewise experiences current human feelings and states of apprehension, panic, anger, irritation and so on. When an unclean woman touched him, Jesus 'yelled out' (p. 179): 'Who touched My clothes' (Mark 5:30); on the Cross, he 'bellowed in a loud voice', let out 'an incoherent scream' (p. 267), and so on and so forth. Similarly, his entourage is depicted in modern terms: for instance, the disciples 'were gripped by a disciplined form of religious hysteria' (p. 274); the Virgin Mary is from the beginning seen as a simple woman with a past, possibly even a promiscuous past (p. 12); Jesus suffers from 'a bipolar tendency' (p. 104); and so on. In all this, we should remember, as Chilton himself admonishes us, that while revisionism of this kind can be 'productive' (p. 270), the crucial question of course is *what*, in the end, it produces.

Concluding, I want to submit as my verdict that for all its impressive research and its copious documentation, Chilton's book fails as a contribution to our understanding of the person Jesus Christ. As I said above, his book is more like a novel, or a legend, than a scientifically corroborated historical treatise; the adding of the learned apparatus to the text does not increase its credibility, on the contrary. No historian in his right mind would support the introduction of pseudo-evidence, such as the 'back-translation' of the Lord's Prayer into Aramaic – an exploit exclusively due to Chilton who, in addition, substitutes the personal invocation *Abba*, used by Jesus in his own approach to the Father, for the more usual 'Our Father', *avinu* in Hebrew, a common locution, intended to emphasize the divine roots of the Jews as 'Sons of Adam' (*bene adam*) and in particular the human origin of this 'Son of Man' (*ben ha-adam*, as Jesus calls himself throughout the Gospels).

Not only is the scholarship displayed here superfluous (recall the old adage: *qui nimis probat nil probat* 'whoever proves too much, proves nothing'), but in places it is also a bit dubious. Here are some examples

of Chilton's manipulation of the text: he confuses (for reasons unknown) Jesus' place of origin, the village of Nazareth (properly transliterated as *Natsereth*, stressed on the second syllable and written with the Hebrew letter *tsadi*) with the institution of the Nazirate, described in the Biblical book of Numbers, chapter 6, as the taking of the *neder nazir* 'the oath of Nazirate'. A person who has taken this vow is called 'Nazarite' (*bannaẓir*, Num. 6:18); the word is spelled with a *ẓayin*, not a *tsadi*, and the stress is on the last syllable. Jesus as a person from Nazareth would be called *ba-notsri*, 'the Nazarene' (as Bulgakov has it correctly in chapter one of his *The Master and Margarita*), and not 'the Nazirite', as Chilton translates it, in clear contrast to both the New King James and other English versions (p. 281; Mark 16:6-7. See also p. 273).⁶

When all is said and done, I want to maintain that Bruce Chilton has given us an interesting picture of how a person like Jesus might have lived in Galilee and Judea in the times around the beginning of the Christian era. There were probably dozens of rabbis that went around in the countryside and had their followers with them; some of them are known by name, and in this sense Jesus is one of them. But the interpretation should stop there. All the poetic reflections on Jesus' life and the embellishments that are practiced upon his doings must be attributed to Chilton's poetic imagination, fueled by his impressive knowledge of the times and of the mores of the Jewish civilization into which Jesus was born. However, no amount of contemporary, 'true-to-fact' dressing up can obliterate the fact that very little is known about Jesus' life (if one excepts the stories told by the Evangelists and the author of the *Acts*). Adding historical detail to what basically is free invention on the part of the author does not enhance the truth value of a narrative; at most, it can heighten the impression of a 'truthy' rendering,⁷ of the kind that Mel Gibson tried to realize by having his actors speak Aramaic and Latin in his 2004 film on the passion of Jesus. By doing this, he did not elevate *The Passion* to the level of an historical document, however; in the same way, no amount of scholarly display can counter the status of Chilton's work as basically a literary, non-scholarly (albeit fascinating) flight of the imagination.

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Notes

1. Chilton bases himself here on an over-interpreted passage of John (8:41), in which Jesus berates the scribes and Pharisees who are trying to entrap him, and tells them that they themselves do not do the works of true children of Abraham. Whereupon the Pharisees indignantly claim their relationship with Abraham, saying that they were not 'born of fornication' (not necessarily implying that Jesus was, or even that they think he was).
2. Says Papini himself, commenting on his *I testimoni della Passione*: 'What I did was the work of an artist, a work of poetry, not that of an historian and theologian' (*Ho fatto opera di artista, di poesia, non di storico e di teologo*. Source: <http://www.giovanipapini.it/Gianfalco/OperediPapini.htm>).
3. For another case demonstrating this tendency, compare the medieval Hebrew poem attributed to Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn on the 'Binding and Slaughter of Isaac' (the *Aqedah*), where the fourth line of each stanza consists of a (mostly rather *ad hoc* and inappropriate) Scriptural quotation. See Mey (2006) for details.
4. The book of Daniel is written for a large part in Aramaic, not Hebrew. The Aramaic expression *bar enosh* literally corresponds to the Hebrew *ben adam* 'a human'. (In Modern Hebrew, *enosh* has a somewhat derogatory connotation: 'a little, insignificant male').
5. Even though both Matthew and Mark refer to Daniel as a 'prophet' (24:15 and 13:14 respectively), in the Hebrew Bible, Daniel is not counted among the *nabim* ('prophets') but rather as one of the 'chronicle(r)s' (*ketuvim*).
6. As to the Nazirites, they were bound by vow not to shave or cut their hair, abstain from wine and all other products of the grapevine, and maintain strict ritual purity (Num. 6:3-7). Hence, when Chilton, on p. 299, notes that 'Jesus' personal practice was remarkably *unlike* that of actual Nazirites', this makes his attribution of *nazir* status to Jesus all the more questionable.
7. 'truthy' and 'truthiness' were proclaimed 'words of the year' by the American Dialect Society at its meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, January 6-9, 2006. The terms are supposed to denote a quality posing as truthful, but not quite making it as such.

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