Can We Investigate the Philosophy of Jesus?

The following exchange took place between myself and Professor Lafargue after I mentioned to him in an email that I thought there were some connections between the philosophy of Jesus and Stoicism, and that I was quite keen on investigating those connections. Professor Lafargue's view, eloquently expressed in what follows, is that there is no point in trying to find connections between the Stoics and Jesus, and for that matter no point in trying to investigate Jesus at all, because there is simply no way of figuring out what would count as plausible or implausible claims about what he said and what he believed. I thought that that seemed pessimistic, and in what follows I argued that it might sometimes be possible to make discoveries about what Jesus really believed, and that we can investigate the meaning of his saying even if we disagree with the meanings they are given in the Gospels and want to get past our primary sources. I also argued, here and there, for the specific idea of Stoic connections, but not in much detail, since my disagreement with Professor Lafargue was not over the Stoic readings in particular, but over the whole idea of trying to reconstruct the philosophy of Jesus at all.

Lafargue to Beresford:

Dear Adam,

Here are the notes I made on methodology in interpreting Jesus-material:

To what extent is your method of interpretation self-proving?

Suppose the methodology includes selecting some sayings and excluding others, using Stoic thought as a basis for selecting and excluding. Then this cannot help but produce a group of sayings that have a Stoic look to them. The selection process is already biased toward what it is that you want to prove. It's more convincing if there is at least some *other* basis for selecting, and selecting on this other basis produces a group of Stoic-sounding sayings.

One test of whether you are reading Stoic ideas into the sayings or discovering that they are expressions of a Stoic mind.

If you did not already know from elsewhere the specific Stoic ideas you claim to find in the sayings, would you be able to learn these specific ideas from these sayings alone? Are they sufficiently specific in conveying these ideas that they themselves would be sufficient to convey these ideas to someone unfamiliar with them?

This is a special problem when dealing with sayings that are suggestive and metaphorical rather than straightforward and doctrinal. It is just too easy to take advantage of the malleability of suggestive language to make it suggestive of ideas you bring to the text.

What is the purpose? Can we learn from these sayings specific interesting and valuable developments of Stoic thought that we couldn't learn from other surviving Stoic writings? This again requires wording sufficiently specific to convey to us new ideas, rather than just evoke ideas already familiar to us from elsewhere. Or is the purpose just to connect the name of Jesus to well-known Stoic thought?

Jesus became famous for quite other reasons. If you want to dissociate Jesus from these other reasons, what makes him different from any other unknown Galilean Jew we might discover to have taught Stoic ideas? Is the purpose just to show that, surprisingly, some Galilean Jew taught standard Stoic ideas?

These thoughts underlie my preference for writings that constitute a "strong context." A strong context is a body of writing which makes clear those relationships between ideas that will make them mutually defining -- so that connections between ideas gives each idea a relatively specific meaning. A strong context leads a careful reader to these specific mutually defining meanings, and thus is able to force the mind of a careful reader into seeing things in some new and unique way. A weak context is a body of writing in which it is not very clear what it would mean to interpret any single idea "in context." Weak contexts exert too little control on the mind of the reader to lead that reader to unique and specific ways of seeing the world that are not already familiar.

This is my main objection to selecting from existing writings any particular body of Jesus-sayings and taking them as objects of interpretive study. Effectively, this selection process creates a new writing, a new body of sayings that constitutes a new context determining what it means to interpret each particular saying "in context." It's hard to make such a body of sayings into a strong context, without engaging in the circular reasoning pointed to above: It could become a strong "Stoic" context simply because Stoicism serves as the basis for selecting the sayings and for construing their relation to each other.

Beresford to Lafargue:

Dear Michael,

Your notes on the Jesus issue are very interesting, and here are some of my thoughts:

To what extent is your method of interpretation self-proving? Suppose the methodology includes selecting some sayings and excluding others, using Stoic thought as a basis for selecting and excluding. Then this cannot help but produce a group of sayings that have a Stoic look to them.

I think this is an excellent point and I am very aware of the problem

and of the danger of circularity. I have given this some thought and propose the following approximate criteria for how to go about addressing the interpretative question (What was Jesus saying?). These criteria can be treated as starting assumptions that will have some bearing on which sayings we pick on and how we interpret them. The important thing is that they should not include the blank assumption that Stoic readings are to be preferred *per se*. There should indeed be fully independent criteria for selecting the sayings. It won't do to pick the ones that look Stoic and declare them the only real ones. On the other hand, it also clearly won't do to accept *the whole set*, or the whole set of contexts and interpretations provided by Matthew and Mark. If we do that, then we are simply letting Matthew and Mark do the interpretation for us, and are (bizarrely) declaring that their very idiosyncratic interpretation of the sayings *may not be questioned or challenged*. That would make absolutely no sense; any more that it would make sense to declare (without argument) that *my* interpretation may not be challenged, or *yours*. The independent criteria I propose are these:

(a) ***Assume that Jesus possessed no miraculous or supernatural powers.*** That is a sound assumption, nothing to do with Stoicism. It has the effect of ruling out, or making us suspicious of, sayings that actually involve or are bound up with, miraculous powers: e.g., what Jesus said in the middle of the Transfiguration; or what the dove-in-the-sky said

when he was baptized; or what he said to Thomas after he came back to life.

(b) ***Assume as much psychological normality as possible.*** Again, this invokes no Stoicism. But it is a very important and useful (and hypothetical) criterion. It rules out those sayings that, if they were really uttered by Jesus, imply that he was insane, *given our first assumption.* That is, it gives us reason to be wary of sayings in which Jesus talks a great deal about his miraculous powers, his supernatural status, his ability to predict the future, his knowledge of the exact details of the afterlife, and so on. Wherever possible, in cases where the same sayings may be interpreted *either* such as to imply that Jesus was mad or deluded, *or* such as to avoid that implication, other things being equal we should prefer the latter.

(c) ***Assume that the reasons for Jesus' claims were the kinds of reasons available to a person in his situation, possessed of no miraculous powers or insights or supernatural knowledge.*** This is fairly closely related to the last criterion, but gives us a clear guide when it comes to reconstructing *lines of thought and argument.* It gives us a strong reason to prefer some interpretations to others, other things being equal, viz, those that have an intelligible and plausible and *readily available* line of argument behind them. It is a kind of naturalist assumption, or what biologists call

Uniformitarianism: assume that things worked the same way in the past as they do now. Thus, assume that philosophers thought and arrived at ideas in fundamentally the same way in the past as they do now. It opposes the fairly common, mistaken idea that Jesus may have arrived at his views by miraculous means, or that he may have thought that he was capable of doing so. Neither of those views is very plausible. It is an often-unnoticed fact that Jesus performs just as many *cognitive* miracles in the Gospels as physical miracles: he knows things by miraculous means. For no good reason people are much more willing to accept the stories of cognitive miracles than the stories of physical miracles — at least as an accurate portrayal of his psychology and self-perception.

(d) ***Assume that Jesus did not know the history of early Christianity.*** This is an obviously sound assumption, and gives us reason to be suspicious of sayings (or interpretations) that clearly or probably rely on knowledge of later Christian doctrines or later events, or of the later problems and disputes within the early church.

(e) ***Wherever possible, try to avoid making sayings self-referential.*** Many of Jesus sayings, as traditionally interpreted, have him talking about himself, his own importance, or the importance of being a Christian, accepting the truth about Jesus, etc. I think it is a good

idea to assume that it's better and more accurate to give sayings an independent, non-self-referential meaning, wherever possible. (Example: In the parables of the treasure and pearl, if we take the treasure and pearl to refer to *Jesus himself,* or to faith in Jesus and his message, then the parables are self-referential and have no content until we *import* it from elsewhere. If finding the pearl just means finding Jesus, then we would need a prior knowledge of what it means to 'find Jesus' before we can understand the parable. But if we take the treasure and pearl to refer to something attainable by human beings and describable *without* reference to Jesus (e.g., righteousness), then the sayings have an independent meaning. We already understand what it means to value righteousness. So the parables now mean something on their own. This is preferable because it amounts to giving them meaning as opposed to no meaning. A saying that simply asserts, "Believe me and my sayings" has no content at all: it is just the assertion that the *other* sayings in the set should be accepted.)

(f) ***Assume that Jesus was aware of traditions, and was subject to cultural influences; attempt to identify those influences, and to make what use of them we can in explaining what he is saying.*** This begins to have more bearing on how Stoicism might be useful. But the assumption itself has a

> plausibility that has no direct dependence on the view that the Stoics influenced Jesus. It is merely the very sensible idea that he is pretty much bound to have been influenced by *someone*, and is clearly worthwhile trying to figure out who that may have been.

So, those are my approximate criteria for identifying the most promising material, and they give some idea of how I think it should be approached, but *all* these principles are independent of the view that Jesus' sayings may show some Stoic tendencies.

Lf: *One test of whether you are reading Stoic ideas into the sayings or discovering that they are expressions of a Stoic mind. If you did not already know from elsewhere the specific Stoic ideas you claim to find in the sayings, would you be able to learn these specific ideas from these sayings alone?*

Absolutely. There are plenty of Jesus' sayings that suggest Stoic ideas with perfect clarity, as it seems to me, and that convey those ideas without any need to rely on a prior knowledge of Stoicism. I also fully accept that this does indeed need to be the case for the project to get off the ground. I need to add a proviso here though. I think we need to have the extra idea of the *most natural and easiest* reading of a saying. My claim is that frequently the most natural and easiest reading is (whether the reader knows this or not) a Stoic idea, which,

if the reader takes the saying in that easiest way, conveys itself perfectly well. It should be noted though, that the *standard* readings of many of the sayings are not the easiest and most natural readings. They are, on the other hand, the ones that immediately come to people's minds, because they are the *traditional* readings. There is a risk here of circularity: Am I going to argue that the Stoic reading is "easier" just because it is the Stoic reading? I am aware of that problem and the simple answer is, *no*: I say that there is such a thing as the easiest and most intuitive reading, and that that can be identified and argued for independently of the fact that it (often) happens to be the Stoic reading.

Also, there are some sayings that are not obviously Stoic, but which can be much more easily understood once the hypothesis that they may have an underlying Stoic meaning is tested on them. I think that that is also a useful and valid means of interpretation, even if it only aims to recover the meaning of these sayings by use of similar ideas expressed more clearly elsewhere. I don't see why that project should be dismissed or discarded. Consider a parallel: suppose you discovered that a tenth century historical figure had written the following in his diary:

"I have faith in the promise of my saviour, who died for my sins."

Now, taken out of context, this could mean any number of things. But probably the best way to understand it is to assume that it has a

Christian context, and that the writer is expressing *Christian* ideas. On that assumption, it becomes possible to be rather precise about what he is saying. We would be fairly sure, for instance, that "my saviour" refers to Jesus.

What could be objectionable about that procedure? Yet it remains true that the idea here expressed does not *add* anything to our grasp of Christianity, and certainly does not, on its own, (without any prior knowledge of Christianity) convey any ideas with any clarity.

I propose that for Jesus there are times when seeing or hypothesizing a *Stoic* line of thought allows us to see what he is saying, even though one might not have seen that meaning without a prior familiarity with Stoicism, because the saying is truncated, garbled, fragmented, or surrounded by a bad interpretation written by someone who doesn't understand the saying.

There would be nothing circular about this at all, if the plausibility of the attribution were something like in my parallel. And I believe that the match is often at least that good.

Lf: *What is the purpose? …Is the purpose just to show that, surprisingly, some Galilean Jew taught standard Stoic ideas?*

My purpose is a simple one: We are trying to figure out what Jesus is saying. Is that not purpose enough? I get the impression that this does not strike you as enough. I am happy to admit that I haven't thought about this very much and was simply assuming that the interpretative

and historical project had some point to it, just as it is taken to be worthwhile and interesting in other cases, such as the interpretation of the surviving fragmentary philosophy of Epictetus, Thales, Democritus, Anaximander, Epicurus, and so on.

I am aware that Jesus became famous for other reasons. Specifically, he became famous as a supernatural person on account of beliefs about him that first arose *after his death*. I am not very interested in that fictional, posthumous Jesus. Again, as I said above, I am anxious to avoid simply having to bow down before the Gospel writers. I am fully aware of how they think about Jesus, and what they think he was, and the way that they and their community made him famous. I also don't see why we have to accept their view of Jesus.

I assume that Jesus lived, thought, argued, and died, within the ordinary human space that we all occupy. I am interested in constructing a convincing and satisfactory account of his ideas that places him in that space. I am interested in opposing the view that he belongs in some other, entirely supernatural space. One way to make some progress in that debate is to discover an alternative that is convincing. For that, we need to be aware of exactly the problems and risks that you outline. A circular account of the origins and content of his philosophy will convince nobody except those already committed to it before they begin.

Consider the following parallel. For millennia most people believed

that plants and animals had a miraculous origin. Then the suspicion arose that they had had a natural origin, and the challenge was to figure what form that natural, non-miraculous origin could have taken. The problem was at last solved by Darwin. For some people this new natural history of animals is a disappointment, while others remain sceptical, and think that we cannot be sure if Darwin's theory is correct. For my part, I find Darwin's theory convincing, and far more interesting than the earlier, miraculous account of animal origins.

I regard the present problem as loosely analogous. For millennia people have believed that Jesus' ideas had a miraculous origin — that they popped into his head fully and perfectly formed, because he possessed supernatural knowledge and limitless cognitive powers. We have very good grounds to suspect that in fact his ideas had some kind of *non-miraculous* origin, involving gradual development, and the usual, step-by-step, mundane processes of thought. Similarly, we have good grounds for suspecting that the stories *about* Jesus also arose (later) by some similar process of gradual evolution from ordinary beginnings to their extraordinary final state — step by intelligible step. I think it's worth the effort to try to reconstruct these processes, and that there is every hope that we can find some convincing solution, and that when we do it will be far more interesting than the story of miraculous revelation told by Mark.

These thoughts underlie my preference for writings that constitute a "strong context." A strong context is a body of writing which makes clear

those relationships between ideas that will make them mutually defining -- so that connections between ideas gives each idea a relatively specific meaning.

I am not sure what you mean by a "strong context" in this case. If, ultimately, you mean the context provided by Mark, then I make the same objection as before. I refuse to be bullied by Mark. You seem to mean 'either we accept the way Mark interprets the sayings — accept his "strong context" which forces certain readings on us — or we declare them *uninterpretable*, and pay no attention to them at all.' Why? Why not think that Mark is often wrong, *and* that Jesus' sayings are well preserved enough to be worth investigating?

By the way, here is a very rough sketch some of the points of similarity that exist between Jesus and Stoicism. I should stress, though, that the main argument for the connection comes from the *details*, not from the outline; it also comes, in my view, from the way that the Stoic readings can shed light on otherwise mysterious sayings, a fact not captured by this list of similarities:

(1) **The pre-eminent and transcendent value of spiritual goods** ('virtue' for the Stoics, 'righteousness' for Jesus). (These may be treated as synonymous; the difference in terminology is almost certainly a matter of translation.) Righteousness (or God's rule) makes everything else of secondary importance.

(2) **To be righteous is to be subject to God's will**. Or, to be subject to God's will means to be righteous.

(3) **The contrast and conflict between righteousness and wealth, power, status**. The further idea that this conflict *cannot be resolved*, and that we must choose *either* those 'worldly' things *or* righteousness.

(4) **The inability of external misfortune to affect the happiness of the wise man**. The *invulnerability* of the good man and of the life based on following the will of God.

(5) **The use of paradoxes.** Happiness paradoxes. Happiness paradoxes that assert that the good man is blessed even if poor, powerless, humble, etc.

(6) **The argument from design, and idea of the planned universe.** The evidence of God's care in every detail of the universe's design; the evidence of God's concern even in the simplest objects; birds, flowers, hair, stones.

(7) **The idea that the goodness of the world's design is hidden and unobvious**, and that it extends to the lives of human beings. The use of the expression "Seek and you will find" specifically to invite people to discover the benevolent purposes of God that must lie behind their lives.

(8) **The use of parable.** Details of parables: banquet parables; vineyard parables; master/slave parables.

(9) **The importance of *action* and of *living* the right way, and practical adherence to the right ethical view over mere pedantic doctrinal expertise**. ('Doctrinal expertise' means knowledge of the niceties of

authoritative philosophical texts for the Stoics, and knowledge of the niceties of Biblical law for Jesus.)

(10) **The non-cumulative, instantaneous benefit of having the right view**.

(11) **The importance of using our own judgment**. The idea that God communicates understanding of his design and his will *through human capacities.*

(12) **Details of terminology**: *pneuma*, *logos*, *fire*, *God as king*, "*seeking and finding*".

(13) **Rejection of the need for specialized modes or places of worship (temples).**

(14) **The idea that life's challenges, especially ethical challenges (but also those presented by circumstances) are a summons by God for action and a call to duty**. Parables involving the image of God as the captain/master/owner/host calling on us, inviting us, asking us to rise to the challenge.

(15) **The idea that wrongdoers should be forgiven without limitation.**

(16) **The idea that we should strive for inner goodness — goodness of our choices — and not just goodness in our actions.**

(17) **The idea that we must live according to God's will, not our own.**

(18) **Cosmopolitanism**.

(19) **Fascination with martyrdom.** Willingness to die for principle. Belief in the unimportance of death.

All of these rather detailed ideas are found in full in both Stoic philosophy and in the surviving sayings and parables of Jesus. I think

there's enough here for this to be well worth further investigation.

Lafargue to Beresford:

Dear Adam,

I see you have thought a great deal about methodology in this project. I still see some problems in the method. These mainly have to do with the fact that recovering the real Jesus is a matter for objective historiography, discovering empirical facts with the use of empirical historical evidence. Objective historiography is a very new discipline (scarcely 200 years old), and puts us in a new position in relation to early Christianity, the implications of which have to be carefully thought through.

All empirical inquiry starts of course with some presuppositions, but we have to make some distinction between the presuppositions governing the empirical inquiry and the results of empirical inquiry.

If I understand you right, you want to offer rational arguments for an empirical fact -- that Jesus himself could not have thought in supernatural terms. But instead of offering empirical evidence for this, you state it as a presupposition of the inquiry. We start out the inquiry already knowing that Jesus could not have thought in supernatural terms, and this is how we can separate genuine sayings of Jesus from

sayings spuriously attributed to him. So the method still seems to me self-proving - not that Jesus was a Stoic, but that he was a rational philosopher.

Do you have some historical hypothesis about this? It seems there were many people around Jesus, and certainly immediately after Jesus, who thought in supernatural terms. How can we know that he did not? Is it that no one ever thinks that he himself is casting out demons, people only make up stories about other people casting out demons? Is it that there was a sudden historical shift -- in Jesus' own time no one thought they were casting out demons, but the generation immediately after this began to think in these terms?

This issue seems a complicated one for modern objective historiography. I agree with your principle that the historian must assume as a presupposition that people in the past were people like us, living in pretty much the same kind of world that we live in. Even though they might have thought that they were casting out demons, we can't accept this as a real explanation -- that the reason they thought they were casting out demons is that there really are demons who possess people and can be cast out. We have to find some more naturalistic explanation, such as "mental illness" neurosis and psychosis that has become part of a rational science today (but only remarkably recently).

But this is different from saying that people in the past could not have thought they were casting out demons. In this sense they were very unlike us. They lived in the same actual world that we live in (without demons), but many of them lived in a very different thought world than we do. Understanding their thought and discourse requires an imaginative effort to enter into a thought-world very different from our own (perhaps not unlike entering into a science-fiction world of Star Trek).

I find the weakest part of your argument to be the transition from saying that it was not plausible that Jesus was actually working miracles to saying that it is not remotely possible that he could have *thought* he was working miracles.

Some scholars have been trying to apply objective historiography to early writings about Jesus, and one of the results of this has been to show the amazing proliferation of sayings and stories surrounding the figure of Jesus. Obviously many people were putting into the mouth of Jesus all kinds of things that he probably did not say himself, and the variety and diversity of ideas attributed to Jesus is also very extensive (something similar seems to have happened to Socrates, and to Confucius). This is one of the main things that makes me sceptical of the possibility of using objective historiography to recover the real Jesus. It's quite possible of course that Jesus was a rational philosopher, and all the supernatural stuff is a pure creation of

subsequent authors. But can we know on the basis of empirical evidence that the reverse did not happen -- that Jesus himself thought in very supernatural terms, and some subsequent authors put sayings in his mouth to tone it all down make him sound like a more rational teacher of Stoic philosophy popular at the time? I wish we had more reliable evidence about the real Jesus, but empirical inquiry must operate with whatever evidence is actually available, and in this case I don't see that we have available evidence necessary for this project.

There is also a deeper issue involved here for me, having to do with the presuppositions behind the quest for the historical Jesus. What gives this quest the important purpose it is almost universally assumed to have?

I think the usual suppositions rest on shaky historical grounds. The usual grounds go something like this: The validity of the Christian faith depends on the claim that it was founded by the real Jesus. If the real Jesus was different from the Jesus presented in the writings of his early interpreters, then beliefs based on the early interpreters lack validity, and should be abandoned in favour of whatever can be shown to be the real thought and the real story of the real Jesus. If the real Jesus was different from the Jesus of the interpreters, we know for sure that the real Jesus was superior to the image of Jesus presented to us by his early interpreters.

Are these suppositions based on historical evidence? Do we have objective historical evidence to show that whatever Jesus said must have been superior to what interpreters put into his mouth? This is what I think we do not have. Traced to its historical origins, we have to say that the impression we have that the real Jesus was superior to the Jesus of the early interpreters, is actually an impression created by these interpreters themselves. Modern historiography has shown that the earliest interpreters (Paul and Mark) are most likely creating an image of Jesus largely of their own making rather than delivering to us the real story and the real teaching of the real Jesus. But on the other hand, it is the image of Jesus that they and others created which gave Jesus whatever aura of specialness and authority he came to have in subsequent generations and down to our time. We have no other reason to suppose that special greatness and authority attaches to the person Jesus.

So it’s not that I regard Mark as an authority on Jesus-as-authority. I take it for granted the Mark's message is different from Jesus' message. The message of the real Jesus certainly did not consist in telling the story of Jesus. I tell my students to regard Mark as a "Jesus-play," and focus on the intended message of the play itself, which is more likely the real basis for the faith of early believers outside Israel. I think careful reading shows that Mark took for granted that miracles happen [his audience probably thought that some among them were miracle-workers], but he is critical of a religion based on miracle-

working power and centres his message on Jesus as a defeated and powerless "loser.")

From an objective historical point of view, Christians have almost surely always been mistaken in thinking that their faith is based on the real Jesus. From the beginning, Christianity has been based on image (s) of Jesus created by his interpreters. (The only early Christians whose thought we are informed about were not converted by Jesus in Israel, but by preaching about Jesus to Greek-speaking people outside of Israel. Paul and Mark, the earliest of these preachers whose writings are extant, were not among the followers of the living Jesus, and determinedly set themselves against those [Peter, James, and John] who did know him personally.)

This is why I think it is important to ask about the purpose of the project of recovering the historical Jesus. Almost everyone assumes that this has an important purpose. But really, the development of modern objective historiography has put us in a radically new position, which we should thoroughly carry through. To me there is something intellectually dishonest about continuing to implicitly rely on suppositions (the superiority of the real Jesus) not founded on objective historical evidence, and only use objective historiography to try to give new content to the picture of Jesus.

Especially in this case, because our picture of the real Jesus is so

under-determined by available historical evidence, the supposition that the real Jesus must have been superior to the Jesus created by the early interpreters, just serves modern interpreters as a device used in a tug of war to claim Jesus' authority for their own views of the truth, and deprive the views of other "false interpreters" of this authority.

This is how I tend to see your project as well -- I suspect it is the underlying reason why you begin with the supposition that Jesus himself could not have thought in supernatural terms. Jesus must have been superior to his interpreters, and of course a superior person must have been a rational philosopher rather than a believer in the supernatural. Am I wrong about this?

But this is not just an objection to your particular project alone. I think it is a general problem with almost all attempts to recover the original Jesus - from Horsley's attempt to make Jesus into a neo-Marxist revolutionary leading peasant resistance against Roman imperialism, to Dan Brown's picture of Jesus as the father of Mary Magdalene's son, the progenitor of France's Merovingian kings. (One figure worth reflecting on this respect is Albert Schweitzer who wrote an early book on "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," showing that the resultant pictures of Jesus showed more about the questers than about Jesus. Schweitzer was also one of the few scholars whose attempt at objective historiography led him to conclude that Jesus was not someone he wanted to follow. He ended up thinking Jesus was

probably a somewhat deluded fanatic whose message centred on the end of the world coming soon. He left his theology job, became a doctor, and opened the first Western style hospital in the Congo to do some real physical good for people, and atone for the sins of European colonizers.)

These are my particular views. One reason I stopped reading most biblical scholarship is that it seems to me to lack this thoroughgoing intellectual honesty, because it's so tempting to go along with the ungrounded by immensely tenacious popular assumption that Jesus must have been superior to all his interpreters.

If you're concerned about what biblical scholars will think, I think they will be wary of your view of Jesus as a rational philosopher. This was a very popular idea in the late 19th century, but biblical scholars in the 20th century became convinced that this was a misguided attempt to make Jesus more congenial to the modern secular mentality, and that more objective research would remove Jesus further from this mentality rather than bring him closer. Most scholars in this field will probably see your project as an attempt to revive a discredited idea.

On the other hand, anything written about the real story of the real Jesus seems to have enormous appeal today. I just saw a PBS special last night (4/9) about "The Gospel of Judas". It was very clever in making a great fuss about its "historical authenticity," and all the

scientific apparatus (carbon dating, etc.) that shows that indeed "it does belong to ancient Christianity." They seem to deliberately leave vague the question about what "authentic" means, wanting to give the impression that the Gospel of Judas might well give the views of the actual person Judas and real words Jesus spoke to Judas. But the "authenticity" showed by the actual dating procedures only confirmed that this was a writing from around 250 A.D. It's clearly a Gnostic writing, having Jesus tell Judas that Jesus' crucifixion was necessary to separate his spiritual soul from his material body, and so Judas would be performing a great religious service by betraying Jesus so the Romans could aid in this process! This is a wonderful discovery because it uncovers a possible secret about the real Jesus that the Church Fathers have been trying to hid from us all these years, preventing the unjustly defamed Judas from having his say.

Beresford replies to Lafargue:

Dear Michael,

once again I very much enjoyed and appreciated your thoughtful response to my arguments. I have again written down a few thoughts of my own. Your strong scrutiny, and experience, and the various challenges you raise are helping me a great deal in forcing me to formulate and articulate my ideas on these issues. I very much hope that we can continue this discussion as I proceed with writing up my

ideas.

At one point in your letter you seem to accuse me, perhaps only glancingly, by association, of intellectual dishonesty. Perhaps that wasn't what you meant but it seemed to read that way. Yet, as closely as I examined your actual argument, it seemed that the intellectual dishonesty in this instance (for me at any rate) only consisted in the assertion that Jesus probably did not believe that he could walk on water. Your claim seems to be that this assertion (about the improbability of his holding that belief) *is so obviously false that I must know that it is false*.

But this is really not the case. I do not know, deep down, that it is false. I think — all the way down — that it is true.

I say some more about this issue of honesty below, and about the issue of supernaturalism which is what aroused your accusation against certain interpreters. But more generally, I hope that you won't seriously question my good faith, for any reason, in investigating these interesting questions. You are of course free — within polite and useful discussion — to tell me that my ideas are implausible, or even totally absurd or crazy. *Please do so*. But I was a little hurt to be told that I must actually be lying, and don't see why you would need to say such a thing.

I respond to some of your points first, then at the end of these notes I set out an interpretation of a particular episode in the synoptics which touches upon the issue of Jesus casting out demons. That will give you some idea of what some of my more detailed

arguments might look like in a project of this kind.

*Lafargue: We start out the inquiry already **knowing** that Jesus could not have thought in supernatural terms, and this is how we can separate genuine sayings of Jesus from sayings spuriously attributed to him.*

This is not what I'm saying — although I can see that it might look that way. Yes, I do make presuppositions. But they are strictly hypothetical. They are not claims about what we *know*. I admit that any one of them may well be wrong, and in the end their value and plausibility can only emerge slowly, bit by bit, from the results that they produce. That part of the process — drawing out the results — must constantly take care to be non-circular. Whether or not it will be non-circular, in spite of what you say, cannot be decided by some very quick argument beforehand. It has to be decided case-by-case, claim by claim, and in the light of the overall picture that emerges — and in no other way. The reason we find Horsley's claims about Jesus being a marxist revolutionary implausible is not because the initial assumptions were themselves obviously wrong — as a hypothesis I don't see why they wouldn't be well worth looking into — but because the results are so poor. That is, his detailed readings of the sayings are counter-intuitive, clumsy, selective, and evasive, so as to keep the hypothesis afloat. It might have turned out otherwise — and then his hypothesis might have turned out to be a good one. If my results likewise turn out to be that clumsy, then my hypothesis will be a failure in the same

way. But *let's wait and see*. You can't adjudicate on this until you have seen the overall interpretation made in the light of the Stoic hypothesis.

Let me give a parallel for my argument here about using a hypothesis.

When Michael Ventris thought that he had deciphered Linear B (to compare the great with the small), his claims were derided and rejected by a large number of classical scholars. His argument went like this: "I *hypothesized* that the language of Linear B was Greek. Then I tried to make sense of some of the tablets on that hypothesis, and it seemed to work quite well, and gave me some hypothetical values for several of the signs. I tried those signs in *other* tablets and again, they seemed to work well at producing meaningful Greek sentences; that gave me more signs, and so on, until I had a large number of persuasive and coherent readings of signs, and of the tablets, all resulting from the initial assumption that they were in Greek." Critics pointed out that Ventris had no good reason for his initial assumption. Also, that several of the readings would only have been arrived at *on* the initial assumption. Hence, the critics claimed, the whole edifice is a mirage, because all his readings were just the result of, and an attempt to prop up, an initial unjustified hypothesis.

The critics were wrong. They were arguing backwards. In reality, it was perfectly fine for the initial guess to be just a guess. (Ventris himself did not think it was a very good guess). The hypothesis had the right to be tested; and it was shown to be right, not beforehand,

but only as a result of the web of obviously satisfactory readings that arose from it, including large numbers that provided, bit-by-bit, further independent support for the hypothesis.

My hypothesis, likewise, should not be rejected beforehand, on the grounds that we have no very good initial reason to assume it. It should be tested and evaluated only in the light of its results. The weight of the results must be evaluated cumulatively, exactly as with Ventris's hypothesis. So it is crucial to wait and see how many independently plausible readings it produces.

I certainly don't claim that Jesus could not have thought in supernatural terms. I only claim this kind of thing: that, e.g., he probably did not think that he could walk on water or control the weather. Your expression 'think in supernatural terms' is very vague. The effect of that is to (unfairly) lump reasonable and modest attributions (Jesus believed in God, and in God's power over human life) with unreasonable ones (Jesus thought he could kill trees with bad language.) You must separate these elements before you can assert or ask anything useful.

Do you claim that Jesus probably *did* think that he could walk on water and control the weather and kill fig tress with bad language? Be clear about that. If you do (and your objection is that I am wrong about the probabilities) then your view is equivalent to mine: it is a strong claim about the probable empirical facts. Or do you claim that we have no

way of knowing? That's fine. I agree that we have no way of *knowing*. For that matter, we have no way of *knowing* that Jesus could not actually walk on water or control the weather. But it seems a reasonable bet that he couldn't; and for different reasons it seems a reasonable bet that he didn't *think* he could. Or are you claiming, thirdly, that we have no way of making any claims even about the *probabilities* when it comes to matters of his psychology? That we can't even say that one view is more reasonable than another? That seems to me far too pessimistic.

What is a rational philosopher? Is someone automatically a 'rational philosopher' if he doesn't attribute bizarre superhuman powers to himself, like the ability to control the weather? If I think that Jesus probably didn't think that he personally created the universe, does that mean I am making bold, anachronistic empirical claims about him beyond the scope of our evidence? Of course not.

Yes, these are empirical claims; but they are not in the least bit bold, and are certainly not anachronistic or beyond the range of our evidence. Even in 40 AD, how many people, per hundred million, do you think sincerely believed that they had personally created the universe? How many thought that they could spontaneously generate thousands of loaves of bread? Grant that it was one or two, or ten, or even a *hundred*. It follows that even in 40 AD, the occurrence of such a psychological state was stupendously unlikely — to give only the base

probability that other evidence (such as Mark's testimony) will have to be good enough to overturn.

I accept an extension of Hume's argument on this point. Mere testimony is certainly not enough to give us reason to accept the miraculous powers of Jesus, because it is *billions* of times more likely that the miracle stories are false, through some kind of human error, than that Jesus possessed such powers. But likewise — to extend the argument — the base probability that a sane man (any sane man, of any period whatsoever) should come to believe that he could directly control the weather and walk on water is perhaps tens of millions to one. So mere testimony simply doesn't come close to giving us reason to accept that Jesus believed these things about himself and that they formed an important part of his self-understanding. Even if the chance of the testimony being false is very small by the standards of human testimony (a thousand to one?) it will still be — by this rough reckoning — thousands of times more likely that the reports are false than that Jesus actually held these crazy views about himself.

Do you disagree with these estimates? I think they are very generous to the Gospels. So I think it is irrational to think that Jesus believed he could walk on water, merely on the basis of Mark's testimony; it is also irrational to refuse to say how likely it is that he believed he could walk on water. I think that that's just as irrational as refusing to say how likely it is that he actually walked on water. It is irrational to take

odds of millions or billions to one and treat them as evens.

The only rational view is (a) that he could not walk on water and (b) that he did not believe he could walk on water.

There is a very old and tenacious assumption within the Christian faith and within centuries of biblical scholarship that the Gospel writers must be right *somehow or other*. A vestige of that ancient conviction is that even if Jesus did not perform miracles, at least the presentation of his self-perception must be correct. This ancient prejudice must be thrown out — it is a mistake. The psychological picture of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels arises pretty much directly from the miracle stories themselves — and most of those are total fabrications, containing no useful or reliable information of any kind whatsoever about Jesus' self-perception.

Do you reject the miracles or don't you? Do you think that Jesus did, or did not, walk on water?

If you reject the miracles, you must also reject the miracle-based psychology. The two cannot be separated. It's all very well to imagine that Jesus was a 'healer', or carried out 'exorcisms'. But with the huge majority of the miracles there simply is no story that can be told about what he was actually doing, and therefore no psychological story to be told at all. Did he think he was walking on water? Did he imagine that

he was spontaneously generating fish and bread and wine? Did he try swearing at fig trees? What was he actually doing when he thought he was controlling the clouds and rain? And so on and so on. The only plausible thing to be said about these stories is that they are entirely fictional, and that there is therefore no information or evidence to be gleaned from them of any kind at all about the psychology of that real person, the author of the sayings and parables attributed to Jesus. (That author we may as well call 'Jesus'. That was probably his name.) That is to say, the Gospels provide us with really no reason at all to think that Jesus believed he could perform those more spectacular miracles. Those miracle stories provide an abundance of information about how Christians thought about Jesus in 100 AD. That's all there is to be said about them.

Jesus believed in God; saw God as central to human life and to our claims about right and wrong; believed that people should be ruled entirely by God; believed that God has a plan for human life and that life under His guidance is the goal of our existence. Are these supernatural beliefs? Yes, and I attribute all of them to Jesus.

Lafargue: *So I find the weakest part of your argument to be the transition from saying that it was not plausible that Jesus was actually working miracles to saying that it is not remotely possible that he could have thought he was working miracles.*

Well, I have just explained my views on this. But in fact I didn't even make that claim in exactly those terms. I never said it was *impossible*. I just think that on balance it is *more likely* that Jesus did not think that he could (e.g.) walk on water, or that the stars altered their course when he was born. (I believe you think so too.) This is a claim about relative probabilities and nothing more. I also said — and this is much more important — that it is not plausible that Jesus thought that he could arrive at ethical views by miraculous means — i.e., without having to think them through, and have reasons for them. Again, this is an extremely modest claim, as it seems to me. It is an important and striking feature of the Gospels that Jesus' ethical views are just as much a miraculous production as his magic fish and magic wine. We are constantly invited to infer that Jesus was simply *born knowing these things* — since he was a magical person with magical epistemic powers. And that, of course, is a kind of philosophical miracle that we must reject. If we do reject it, then we have a very useful tool for interpreting the sayings — namely, the assumption that we are dealing with a human mind arriving at ethical views in the familiar human way.

[Lafargue: *Can we know on the basis of empirical evidence that the reverse did not happen -- that Jesus himself thought in very supernatural terms, and some subsequent authors put sayings in his mouth to tone it all down make him sound like a more rational teacher of Stoic philosophy popular at the time?*]

As I said, I don't know what you mean here by 'supernatural', and it seems vague. I attribute a very large range of supernatural beliefs and thoughts to Jesus. If you mean the miracles, then yes, I suppose it may have gone the other way: perhaps Jesus pretended to perform miracles, and the philosophical teachings were fabricated later. But I think the story I propose is vastly more likely. (He won his fame as a teacher and the miracle stories were fabricated.) In any case the value of that supposition will emerge from the results and certainly cannot be evaluated beforehand. This seems to me a crucial point that you are missing. These sorts of claims are not the end points of research into Jesus; they are not conclusions, but beginnings. They are guesses that allow us to begin a tentative investigation. If the investigation yields results then the guesses may later be seen to have been good guesses; if they do not yield results, then, *and only then*, can they be shown to be bad guesses. You seem to want to dismiss the whole project simply because we 'cannot *be sure*' or 'cannot *know'* that these assumptions are correct *beforehand*. But of course we can't. I have never claimed that we can. At most I describe some of the guesses as good guesses. Your objection is the same as objecting to, say, medical experiments on the grounds that the hypothesis they are designed to test has not yet been proved and is just a guess (when in fact, *that is the whole point of them*.)

Imagine we are trying to get somewhere and don't know the way. You're saying that since we don't know for sure whether to go left, right, or straight ahead, then rather than taking a guess and

seeing where it leads we should just sit down on the sidewalk, fold our arms, and stubbornly do nothing.

Besides, even before the results, your (hypothetical) proposal seems very implausible. The story would have to go like this: Jesus thought that he walked on water, and that he could cure blindness, and that he could spontaneously generate fish and wine, and control the weather, and that he couldn't die, and that he could predict the distant future, and his fame was based on his making lots of claims about himself of that kind. Subsequently, this deluded Jesus was toned down by the attribution to him of a large set of sayings of apparently coherent and moderately interesting philosophical content···by an anonymous author···who happened to be a moderately interesting philosopher··· for some reason or other. Surely, given that the Gospels are stuffed full with miracle stories, this obviously cannot be right. How can the Gospels possibly be a *toning down* of the supernatural side of Jesus? That's like imagining that *Moby Dick* is a reworking of some earlier novel, and that the version we have tones down all the stuff about ships and whales.

[Lafargue: *Are these suppositions based on historical evidence? Do we have objective historical evidence to show that whatever Jesus said must have been superior to what interpreters put into his mouth? This is what I think we do not have. Traced to its historical origins, we have to say that the impression we have that the real Jesus was superior to the Jesus of the*

early interpreters, is actually an impression created by these interpreters themselves. Modern historiography has shown that the earliest interpreters (Paul and Mark) are most likely creating an image of Jesus largely of their own making rather than delivering to us the real story and the real teaching of the real Jesus. But on the other hand, it is the image of Jesus that they and others created which gave Jesus whatever aura of specialness and authority he came to have in subsequent generations and down to our time. We have no other reason to suppose that special greatness and authority attaches to the person Jesus.]

I agree entirely. I have no interest whatsoever in the special greatness or aura of Jesus. In fact, I consider his special status tedious and oppressive. As a child I was expected to take a close and deep interest in everything that Jesus said. I now think of that as exactly parallel to, say, growing up in a country where I am expected to hang on the every word of Lenin, Marx, Chairman Mao, Muhammad, or any other Dear Leader or dead person held up as an authority by political structures and social bullying rather than by their own merits. Lots of people argue over what Jesus really meant because for them he is a kind of dictator whose orders must be obeyed or whose view of life cannot be wrong.

Nevertheless, it is also possible simply to take an interest in what he was saying *without* regarding him in that way.

I have a philosopher's interest in Jesus. I am studying him as I might study Empedocles or Pythagoras or Democritus or Epictetus. So, again, none of the considerations you mention have any bearing on my project. Also, the idea of proceeding by historical methods is fine. A historical method is exactly the one I propose. The attempt to place the philosophy of Jesus within the philosophical context of his time and place in a satisfying way is a historical project. But there are considerations that can and must supplement the historical ones. The idea that we can only decide, for instance, whether or not Jesus controlled the weather or produced fish out of thin air by investigating the historical sources is absurd — as if we do not have powerful reasons of a non-historical kind for being quite sure that he didn't do those things. Likewise claims about his probable psychology do not need to be purely historical. We don't need archaeological excavations of first century Galilee to be sure that Jesus did not believe he was a goat, for instance. We also certainly do not need historical arguments to support the view that he probably did not think that he controlled the weather and walked on water.

[Lafargue: *To me there is something intellectually dishonest about continuing to implicitly rely on suppositions (the superiority of the real Jesus) not founded on objective historical evidence, and only use objective historiography to try to give new content to the picture of Jesus… … the supposition that the real Jesus must have been superior to the Jesus created by the early interpreters, just serves modern interpreters as a device used in*

a tug of war to claim Jesus' authority for their own views of the truth, and deprive the views of other "false interpreters" of this authority.]

I don't assume the real Jesus is superior. I just claim — and this is really a very modest claim — that Jesus *couldn't walk on water* (etc.). That's really it. Nothing that *needs* to be founded on 'objective historical evidence.' The other claims — presented merely as plausible *hypotheses*, as a way of moving forward, nothing more — follow from that initial assumption. If Jesus was a man, he thought like a man. If he couldn't walk on water, he probably didn't believe he could. I can see no way around that conclusion. History is irrelevant.

Did Hannibal think his elephants could fly? No. But how can we be sure of that, without contemporary historical records testifying explicitly to his non-belief in elephant flying ability? Simply because his elephants could *not* fly, and we can be confident that Hannibal was aware of that.

I am not interested here in asserting my own view of the truth. I believe for historical and philosophical reasons that Jesus shows affinities with Stoicism. I also think that Stoicism is one of the very worst philosophies, and I disagree with it profoundly.

Is this approach a violation of the historical evidence? The importance of contemporary and 'empirical' evidence is being hugely inflated here. You might as well claim that we need solid contemporary

accounts before we assume that Jesus had a liver, a heart, and five toes on each foot, and that if we make those assumption we're sneakily falling back on the "tenacious" assumption that Jesus was a physically modern human being. That would be paranoia. But likewise, in arguing for a vast range of plausible claims about his psychology, we don't need to go into a blind panic about the lack of historical evidence, and be too scared to state the bluntly obvious fact that he probably didn't believe that he could kill fig tress by being rude to them.

Lf: This is how I tend to see your project as well -- I suspect it is the underlying reason why you begin with the supposition that Jesus himself could not have thought in supernatural terms. Jesus must have been superior to his interpreters, and of course a superior person must have been a rational philosopher rather than a believer in the supernatural. Am I wrong about this?

Yes, you are wrong. The problem here is that is meaningless to talk in this vague way about the 'rational philosopher' and 'believer in the supernatural'. If you want to make any useful claims here you must revise this terminology. What is a rational philosopher? On your view, it seems to be anyone at all who doesn't claim to have weird supernatural powers. As if Jesus has to be either (a) a fully Hellenized, rational, atheist, materialist philosopher or (b) a person who claims to walk on water and to have created the universe. It is unfair to

characterize my modest assumption (that Jesus didn't believe he could walk on water) as if it were a bold and unusual claim about his psychology for which we have no solid evidence.

You raise an interesting point about the implied comparison between Jesus and his later followers the early Christians and Gospel writers. It's clear that *they* believed in miraculous powers, so why shouldn't Jesus have done so? (That's how I construe your argument.) It's a very fair question, and I answer it like this:

- Early Christians did *not* typically believe that they could predict the future by their own powers (i.e., without the aid of any other person's prophecy or revelation). Neither did Jesus, in my view.

- Early Christians did *not* believe that they could bring dead people back to life. Neither did Jesus.

- Early Christians did *not* believe that they could walk on water or spontaneously generate fish. Neither did Jesus.

- Early Christians did *not* believe that they could kill trees with bad language. Neither did Jesus.

- Early Christians did *not* believe that they were themselves God or that they had created the universe. Neither did Jesus.

So I am fully consistent in attributing psychological states to Jesus *and* to early Christians, and am not claiming that Jesus is in any way 'superior' in this respect to his later followers. The only difference between them is that early Christians believed lots of things *about Jesus* that I think Jesus did not believe about himself. But Jesus very probably believed other rather similar things about other people (e.g., Moses) — so this is no inconsistency. And as you suggested, yes, it is much easier for people to believe strange things *about someone else* than to believe the same things about themselves. In the United States, for example, tens of millions of people believe that Jesus could walk on water. But how many of them believe that *they* can walk on water? I don't think that that kind of belief *about* Jesus involves any kind of abnormality. It is very ordinary for people to believe such things about others. And perhaps Jesus believed equivalent things about Jewish prophets. So I was never claiming that he is any way 'superior' in regard to superstition than his later followers, Mark and Paul and Matthew. On the other hand, even people who think that Jesus could walk on water would have to be totally and utterly crazy to believe that they can walk on water themselves — and likewise Jesus would have to have been mad to think that he could walk on water himself. So it's not that I see Jesus as 'superior' with regard to supernatural beliefs. Rather, I object to the way people are so quick to regard him as so *inferior* to his later followers. Those followers weren't crazy in this respect, why should we so quickly attribute that kind of

madness to Jesus, if we don't have to? That seems very unfair on him.

I would also argue that within any religious community there are people who are more, and less, fanatical, more, and less superstitious. We all know that to be the case of our own times — although we often make the false and baseless assumption that religious belief in the past was more uniform. I believe it can be convincingly argued that Jesus was not very fanatical in his Judaism. In fact, his conflict with other, stricter Jews seems to have been over his willingness to treat Judaic law in a more liberal, relaxed and independently minded way than it was treated by orthodox Jews.The historical record, such as it is, recalls that his opponents were 'Pharisees' and 'Scribes' — i.e., the strictest Jews of the time. Several of his sayings seem to explicitly suggest and promote a non-authoritarian, more critical approach to Judaism. That fact about him is uncontroversial and widely acknowledged. By contrast, the shapers of early Christian beliefs were certainly fanatics. They were fanatical in their beliefs about Jesus, and increasingly so as time passed, probably because the more fanatical Christians bullied and harassed the less fanatical ones. So in that respect I am asserting that Jesus differed from some of his later followers, and was superior in certain ways — he was not a fanatic, as they were. But that is based on the solid evidence of several of his own sayings, not just on the prior thought that it would be nice for us rationalists if it were so.

Your argument seems to go like this:

So my claims do not require that Jesus was 'superior' in this sense. They only require that he was not *stark raving mad*, as he would have been if, for example, he spent his time *talking to trees*. As far as I can tell, you're overplaying the fact that my assumptions reduce some of the 'supernatural' elements in this very modest way. As I explained above, I attribute a huge range of theistic and supernatural beliefs to Jesus. That makes him a 'believer in the supernatural'.

Here is a useful parallel that can help us to see why your worry about attributing 'rationalism' to Jesus is just a muddle. Muslims, or many of them, believe that Muhammad did not really write the Koran. They believe that it was written by God, and literally dictated to Muhammad. Now, suppose you believe that the Koran was not written by God. In that case you necessarily believe that it was written by human beings (probably Muhammad) using normal methods. 'Using normal methods' here means only 'as opposed to taking dictation directly from God.' But what if someone now asked: "But do we have any objective historical evidence that Muhammad employed 'normal methods' for writing his book?" That would just be a misunderstanding. We don't need historical evidence that Muhammad employed normal human cognitive powers, because we are sure that those were the only powers he possessed. We don't need historical evidence for that claim any more than for the claim that he couldn't turn himself into a goat.

Now apply this to Jesus. In saying that he was ‘rational’, i.e., employed familiar powers of reason in the usual way in arriving at his rather complicated ideas about how human beings should live, I am only asserting what necessarily follows from the claim that he did not possess a supernatural source of knowledge or understanding. He was not God, and did not have ideas dictated to him by God. We don’t need any historical evidence that Jesus employed normal human cognitive powers, because we are sure that those were the only powers he possessed.

[Lafargue: *One reason I stopped reading most biblical scholarship is that it seems to me to lack this thoroughgoing intellectual honesty, because it's so tempting to go along with the ungrounded by immensely tenacious popular assumption that Jesus must have been superior to all his interpreters.*]

I agree with the general aim of intellectual honesty. I also agree fully with your view of Horsley’s interesting and Dan Brown’s ridiculous theories. But why should you accuse me of intellectual dishonesty before you’ve even seen any of my actual arguments for the connection between Stoicism and the sayings of Jesus? Is it merely because I say that Jesus probably didn’t attribute extravagant supernatural powers to himself? I find that accusation bizarre. Do we have to say that he did attribute these powers to himself — or we’re being dishonest? Or do we have to claim that nobody can possibly say?

This is how it is: If I said I thought Jesus probably believed he could walk on water, I would be lying, and that would be intellectual dishonesty. If I said I thought this was a difficult question, I would again be lying. I do not believe that it is a difficult question at all. I honestly believe that we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus did not think that he could walk on water.

[Lafargue: *This was a very popular idea in the late 19th century, but biblical scholars in the 20th century became convinced that this was a misguided attempt to make Jesus more congenial to the modern secular mentality, and that more objective research would remove Jesus further from this mentality rather than bring him closer. Most scholars in this field will probably see your project as an attempt to revive a discredited idea.*]

Again, I simply don't see why other people's unpersuasive arguments give you reason to think that my thesis is implausible. That seems dogmatic. Also, I am not motivated by, and have no special interest in 'the *modern secular* mentality'. The Stoic views I attribute to Jesus *pre-date him by four hundred years.* They are also not secular. Stoics obsessed over God more than any other religious or philosophical group known to me. Arguably, their theistic views are even crazier, by modern secular standards, than those of the Gospel writers.

Not being able to walk on water is not part of a 'secular mentality' and

has no connection with secularism. *It is part of the human condition.* The psychological states that come with our physical limitations are likewise not part of the 'secular mentality', but also part of that human condition. They are deep in our nature. Even religious fanatics do not try to fly out of buildings rather than taking the elevator, or try to walk across oceans rather than use boats, or try to produce food spontaneously rather than going to the supermarket just like the rest of us.

****

Re, the **casting out of demons**, here are some thoughts. This itself is an interesting issue. The following illustrates the kinds of considerations that I think can be used in investigating these sorts of questions.

There is a pair of quasi-sayings that occur in all three synoptic Gospels in the same order in the same context. Jesus is accused of using the power of Beelzebub to cast out demons. He responds by saying

(a) **A house divided against itself cannot stand**. (Meaning, Beelzebub cannot be divided against himself.) ⋯And

(b) **How can one enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions without first tying up the strong man? Then his house can be plundered**. (Hence, I must have power over Beelzebub.)

The actual sayings are in bold. Now, the context of these sayings (if it is to be accepted) obviously commits us to the view that Jesus thought that he could cast out demons, or was perceived to be casting out demons. So, I suppose that on my view I have an initial mild suspicion (mild) of this context. I regard (apparent) casting out of demons as less problematic than, e.g., walking on water, but even so, my initial guess might be that the two quasi-sayings here were not originally in this context — perhaps I would further guess that they at some time existed as written sayings without context, and that they were inserted from that source into this 'Beelzebub' context. But that is just a guess, partly based on the feel of the sayings themselves, and only partly on my slight suspicion of the idea that Jesus spent time casting out demons. (The demon possessions might plausibly just refer to mental illnesses of various kinds, and thus be hardly a problem at all, if we allow that Jesus engaged in some kind of doctoring. But there is an important fact about them that should raise our suspicions. They are often inextricably linked with miraculous *recognitions* of Jesus of the kind that would require *real* demons. "I know who you are, you're the messiah!" says the supernaturally well-informed demon. These recognitions seem to be the driving force behind the anecdotes, and are obviously fabrications. For me, that casts the whole genre into some doubt. If we explain the story as a reference to Jesus' concern for the mentally ill, we are stuck with the profoundly bizarre fact that all these mentally ill people 'knew' that Jesus was the messiah.

Are there any other considerations that might help us investigate this hypothesis that the Beelzebub context is a fabrication? Yes, there are several. Here they are:

1. First, we find two other sayings that potentially have the same content as our first saying here. These are:

(a) No one can be a servant to two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

(b) **It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into God's *basileia* [i.e., to be ruled by God].**

The first of these makes the fully explicit and simple claim that you can't serve God and be devoted to riches. (The very probable meaning of that is that you cannot be devoted to living *righteously*, as God wishes you to, and also devoted to riches.) The second saying clearly repeats this idea: a rich man (a man devoted to riches) cannot be under God's power (cannot be a servant of God). But surely the first saying above likewise could be a version of this same idea: **a house** — i.e. a man's soul — **cannot be divided against itself** (a man cannot have two competing goals). If it does '**it will not stand**'; i.e., that kind of conflict cannot be sustained. It can't work. Just as the slave cannot continue to serve the two masters, but must choose between them, a divided house must cave one way or the other. A man trying to pursue

riches *and* be devoted to God is like a two walls of a house straining in opposite directions. The house must fall. (As a minor corroborating linguistic point, note the equivalent future tenses: ⋯ **you *will* hate the one and love the other… …the divided house *will* not stand**. Jesus means 'this is what will happen if you try that'; hence the future tense.)

2. This hypothesized connection gets further support elsewhere. There is another 'house' parable: *the houses built on the rock and on the sand.* In that parable the house seems to represent the soul of a man — exactly as we hypothesized for the first saying above. It may either be *built on rock* (the rock must be God, and a soul built on rock is a soul devoted to God, and to righteousness) or *built on sand* (devoted to riches and other superficial and empty goals). If it is devoted to God, the rock, then nothing in life can overthrow it; if it is devoted to superficial things, the shifting sand, then it is vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the storms of misfortune. This is more or less the standard reading of the parable, and it is certainly the easiest and most intuitive reading. Thus, the 'house' has exactly the same meaning in this parable as in the hypothesized version of our first saying above. It's a very good match. A *divided* house cannot stand, and a *poorly founded* house cannot stand. The parable also has a basically similar content to the other three sayings. Some of the sayings are talking about conflict between devotion to God and to other values, one is talking about the invulnerability of the life devoted to God; but the

ideas cohere well. I might even guess that the two house parables formed a pair, making two related claims like this: (1) You must be devoted to God and righteousness, because if you are devoted to other, more vulnerable things your life may crumble around you, and (2) you must be devoted *exclusively* to God and righteousness: don't think you can have it both ways, pursuing wealth and so on *and* being devoted to God. That won't work.

3. There is also another 'thieves breaking in' saying: **Do not store treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy them, and where thieves break in and steal them. Store up treasures in heaven [**i.e., with God**]… where thieves do not break in and steal them**. This saying is similar to the four others we have looked at (including the hypothesized first saying from above). It seems to mean something like this: that you should not value worldly things, which can be *taken away from you* by misfortune. Instead you should devote yourself to God and exclusively value that relationship. If you do, then nothing in the world will be able to take away what you set value on. Probably he means that nothing from the outside can take away your righteousness, since that depends purely on your own soul. The saying thus has a very similar content to the other (uncontroversial) sayings, as well as the independently reconstructed one. There is also this detail that we may now make use of: the *thieves ransacking the store of treasures* (in a house) represent the vicissitudes of the world taking things away from you. Plausibly, they represent misfortunes taking

away the things that you value if you are so foolish as to set value on superficial things (like riches) that are vulnerable to misfortune.

4. In that case, we might guess that the second of our Beelzebub sayings above has a similar content. That is, we might plausibly guess that the *thieves ransacking the house* — the identical image — has the same basic meaning. *Thieves cannot steal from a man's house unless they first tie him up*: i.e., the world cannot do you any harm as long as you have the strength that comes from your detachment from worldly things and devotion to God. The world first has to *tie you down* — i.e., cause you to have attachments to it — if it is to rob you of what you value by some stroke of misfortune. If you are tied to money (and suchlike), then your life is overthrown when you lose your money. But if you are not tied to money (and suchlike) then no misfortune can get to you. The world has to tie you down before it can rob you. The image seems crystal clear to me.

With this hypothesis in view, let's now turn to the Gospel of Thomas, where we find, without context, one of our two Beelzebub sayings, as well as another new saying which Thomas fails to connect with the first (it is separated by several sayings and comes later, when it clearly should come before) but which very clearly is part of the same material. (In fact, it may even be that these are two parts of one saying.) The two Thomas sayings, in their probable correct order, are as follows:

You can't enter a strong person's house and take his possessions by force without tying his hands. Then you can loot his house.

For this reason, I say, if the owners of a house know that a thief is coming, they will be on guard before the thief arrives and will not let the thief break into their house and steal their possessions. As for you, then, be on guard against the world. Prepare yourselves with great strength, so the thieves can't find a way to get to you, for the misfortunes you expect will come.

The first of these is identical to our second Beelzebub saying above. It is so similar in phrasing — note the identical fragmentary second sentence — that there can be no doubt that they come from a common source. (We may assume that Thomas is not using the Synoptics directly or vice versa; an abundance of other evidence establishes that this is the case.) *The Beelzebub context is conspicuously absent.* That in itself proves nothing, but does give us quite good grounds for a plausible theory. Notice also that Thomas nicely strengthens the hypothetical reading of the second saying that we figured out on our own by looking only at the other synoptic sayings with similar content. With that support, I think we have a good overall case for our original guess, that the Beelzebub context is a fabrication, not the original context of the sayings and that the meaning it imposes on the sayings is wrong.

At the very least notice that it has the effect of making the (relatively simple) meaning of the sayings *invisible*. The sayings are effectively spoiled by the Beelzebub nonsense, and thereby lost from the corpus (except that one of them happens to have survived in Thomas).

But note the modesty of this theory: the simple meaning that this hypothesis attributes to the sayings is the same as the *already accepted* meaning of several other very similar sayings already in the standard corpus. So we are not making Jesus say anything new. Nothing very exciting emerges from our hypothesis as regards the sayings themselves. But we do now have quite good grounds for strengthening our suspicion of the Beelzebub context. To see this, consider the different options we now have. We must choose either (a) or (b):

(a) Jesus often pretended to cast out demons or thought that he was doing so. One day he was accused of being in league with Beelzebub because of these apparent powers. He responded with the two reported sayings, each affirming his power over Beelzebub. The similarity of the two sayings to several other sayings in the synoptics (sayings of utterly different meaning) is a mere coincidence. The clear and quite different (and plausible) interpretation of one the same sayings, given in Thomas, is wrong. The absence of the Beelzebub context in Thomas is an omission and a deliberate misrepresentation. Thomas and the

synoptics evidently share a source, and Thomas deliberately deleted the references to Beelzebub, which must have been in the earliest source for the sayings. His aim was perhaps to make Jesus seem less supernatural and more philosophical. To that end, he carefully doctored the sayings and manipulated the way they would be taken by his readers. Yet he failed to see the connection in sense between the two parts of the material (he makes no effort to connect them.) Thus, we have to suppose that he simultaneously doctored the presentation of the material with great cunning and did not even understand it well enough to present it in the right order. The apparent close coherence in thought and imagery of all the several sayings (four from the synoptics, two from Thomas and his interpretation, as well as the Beelzebub pair) is another coincidence. The apparent strangeness of Jesus believing that he had this power over Beelzebub is to be accepted as a feature of a different age. All in all, we have no reason to suspect that Jesus did not claim to have power over Beelzebub, as the synoptics report.

(b) Jesus did not believe that he had power over Beelzebub. (This is psychologically much less problematic, for independent reasons.) He authored a set of sayings about the *invulnerability* of the man who devotes himself to God, and the inconstancy of a life devoted to the superficial goods, and the conflict that must arise between those two goals. (This origin for the sayings is, for

independent psychological reasons, entirely problem-free.) Several of these sayings survive in the synoptics in exactly that form. Several also survive in Thomas in exactly that form. Two of them were also placed in a fabricated context involving the casting out of demons and transformed — rather crudely and clumsily — into claims by Jesus about his ability to cast out demons. They still show an obvious affiliation with the other sayings, in spite of that clumsy adaptation. Thomas and the synoptics certainly draw closely (whether directly or indirectly) from the same written source in reporting one of these sayings. But the Beelzebub context is absent from Thomas's version. It is not in Thomas because it was not in the source. The reason it was absent from the source is that it arose after the composition of the source. The reason for the strange context in the synoptics is not totally clear, but it seems likely that the sayings were *attached to* an already existing or growing tradition that Jesus had had the power to cast out demons. There are large numbers of other examples of sayings being given rather ad-hoc 'contexts' in the synoptic Gospels. There are also large numbers of obviously fantastic stories in the Gospels about Jesus' miraculous powers — e.g., his walking on water or controlling the weather — which we likewise are quite sure must have been fabricated out of whole cloth. So there is nothing remotely unusual about such a fabrication. The explanation of them may be tricky, but there can be no doubt at all that they occurred.

On balance, I find (b) much more likely, for a large number of reasons. It seems to me to involve no really problematic processes or events at all. The first option, by contrast, seems to me a profoundly bizarre story, and to be overwhelmingly unlikely. All in all we have excellent reasons for preferring (b) over (a). There is a confluence here of textual, philosophical, psychological, and internal evidence.

This illustrates the kind of argument that I think can lead to reasonable claims about the origins and meaning of some of this material. Notice that I did not invoke Stoicism at any point. It so happens that the several sayings are rather Stoic in their content — but their content is clear enough without our having to rely on any knowledge of Stoicism to see that the sayings mean something of this kind.

Jesus has a great talent for vivid *imagery*: I would use these images — the thieves of misfortune ransacking the house that is a man's distracted soul, the house swept from the sand by the storms of life, the divided house — to *explain* Stoic doctrines to students and make them more memorable. The images are much better and clearer than anything we find in Epictetus. Thus we would be meeting one of the conditions you set in your last letter — Jesus would indeed actually be helping to further our understanding of Stoicism. It is a matter of plain fact, whether accidental or not, that these images really do help to illustrate the Stoic view extremely well.

Of course, the sayings can be interpreted differently; but these interpretations are modest, intuitive and plausible readings, and in most cases in accordance with the standard tradition. This is not chapter one of *The Da Vinci Code II*; nor am I proposing readings of the sayings that you would only ever arrive at if you *already* shared the conviction that Jesus (a) was a Stoic, and (b) did not think that he had power over Beelzebub. Rather, (b) was just a hunch, and (a) didn't enter into our reasoning at all. All we need is some knowledge of some of the other sayings and their well-established meaning plus a willingness to think critically about Matthew and Mark. But it was initial hypothesis about the suspicious nature of the Beelzebub context that led us to these solid findings.

On the other hand, I would express exactly your worry against the synoptic writers themselves. These sayings do not lend themselves at all to being about Jesus' (or anyone's) power to cast out demons. *No one would ever think*, taking them on their own (e.g., as they are in Thomas), that they had anything to do with Beelzebub. You would only take them that way if you were *already* convinced that Jesus is talking about casting out demons. Without Mark's heavy-handed prompting, the sayings do not even remotely resemble claims about demons. In this case, the synoptic writers themselves seem to me to be forcing a reading on the sayings every bit as clumsy as, say, a Marxist reading of Jesus, or as absurd as any other of the crackpot theories you rightly claim to be wary of. So, if we are going to criticize Dan Brown and Richard Horsley in this way, we are bound to criticize

Mark in the same way for doing the same thing. In fact, he is a *much more appropriate* target of your complaints. If we let him off, perhaps by dismissing the whole idea that there is even such a thing the 'real' meaning of the sayings, and instead treat the Gospels as a kind 'Jesus-play' with their own purpose — well, that's fine; but then we have to treat Horsley in the same way. His interpretations would also have to be treated as a 'Jesus-play', and we would no longer have any right to criticize them on the grounds that they are implausible or poorly grounded — because the whole idea of plausibility *about Jesus* would have been dismissed. (The fact that Horsley does not *present* his theories as a play is irrelevant. *Neither does Mark.* And if it would be more charitable to treat Horsley's claims as a form of self-contained story-telling, why not do so?) So now we cannot coherently accuse him — or any other interpreter of Jesus — of intellectual dishonesty, seeing as we acknowledge no facts for anyone to be dishonest about in the first place; how can you be a dishonest writer of a play? Conversely, if Horsley *is* intellectually dishonest — but let's put that more politely by saying, if he is sloppy in his use of the evidence and his claims about the empirical facts — then Mark is clearly 'intellectually dishonest' in exactly the same way, or more so. His arguments are at least as sloppy. He, or someone, took the two sayings we examined and (implicitly) asserted that they supported his wild theory that Jesus had power over Beelzebub, and presented them as necessarily bearing out that crackpot view. *No evidence for that theory is in fact afforded by these sayings taken on their own*; that use of them

really does amount to a gross and irresponsible misrepresentation of the evidence, on the part of Mark, or whoever first took the sayings and placed them in the Beelzebub context.

Lafargue to Beresford:

Dear Adam,

I apologize for using the phrase "intellectual dishonesty," considering the way you understood this and your justifiable reaction to the way you understood this as an accusation. I think I will never again use the phrase to refer to anyone else.

But to be fair, you seriously misunderstood the way I tried to carefully define this term. It had nothing to do with anyone saying what they do not believe, you or Horsley or anyone else. A much narrower issue is involved -- a failure to think through in a very thorough way the new position that modern objective historiography has put us in. I think Horsley and the many others who try to reconstruct the historical Jesus have failed to think this through in a radical enough way. They implicitly and mostly unconsciously rely on the reputation of Jesus to give their project the importance it has in the minds of their readers, while substituting their own Jesus-story for the Gospel-stories responsible for giving Jesus the reputation they implicitly and unconsciously rely on. I would never accuse them of plain dishonesty

-- I'm sure they truly believe in what they are saying, all the way down. Reading over what you say, I would no longer associate you with them in this way. I had guessed that the reason you were assuming Jesus could not have thought he had supernatural powers, is because you thought Jesus must have been superior to this kind of thought. If I understand you rightly, your reason is quite different, but I now find this reason very problematic for some other reasons. I'll get to that below.

Even though you focus mainly on the problem of Jesus as miracle worker, this is not the most important problem I see in your project. Let me get this main problem first. Let me grant, for the sake of the argument, that we should exclude all the material connected with Jesus that you want to exclude (miracle working, self-referential sayings, etc.).

I think your problems are just beginning.

Do you want to say that all we have to do is subtract the material of this kind, and we can trust that *everything* else goes back to the real Jesus?

If you don't think this, what other criteria can we use to sort through this material? For example, would you trust *all* the non-miracle and non-self-referential material in the Gospel of Thomas, or do you have

some criteria for distinguishing which sayings in Thomas go back to Jesus and which do not?

In the latter part of your piece I see a reference to a source from which Thomas and the Synoptics drew. Is it part of your argument that there was some very early written source that does represent the real teachings of the real Jesus, and nothing but the teachings of Jesus? This seems similar to those who posit a sayings source Q. I haven't read much about this lately, but do most of those who posit Q think that it represents only the sayings of Jesus and nothing added?

Some of your language seems to suggest that there did exist at some point a reliable source of knowledge about Jesus' teaching which the authors of surviving documents could have used if they wanted, and should have used, instead of knowingly fabricating false pictures. Does your reconstruction of Jesus' use of the specific sayings you deal with depend on an hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas is relying on a document which can be relied on to give us only the actual sayings of Jesus and also indicate how these sayings were connected with each other in his mind?

I actually agree with you (on somewhat different grounds) that Mark's use of the saying "No house divided against itself can stand" probably interprets the saying in a context different from Jesus' context. I just don't see how one could show that the different context you suppose

for the saying interprets the saying in the way Jesus did, and wasn't just due to some other person's fabricated context, either Thomas or his source. For example, this saying sounds to me like it could easily be a folk saying, able to be used in many different contexts, not all of them moral or religious.

If you don't have a theory about this, I think you probably need one, and some evidence to back it up. It's not enough to say that Mark's use of the proverbs are his own construction, or even to say that Thomas is probably relying on an earlier written source. Don't you also need to show that this earlier written source probably contains only sayings from Jesus, and gives them the interpretation he gave them?

Here is my contrary impression about the nature of our sources, giving rise to my admittedly rather radical skepticism: Very soon after Jesus' death, groups with quite different worldviews began to associate their message with the person of Jesus. They freely invented stories about Jesus, and sayings which they put in the mouth of Jesus. Some sayings in common circulation before Jesus were also attributed to him (see collections of sayings from rabbinic sources similar to sayings attributed to Jesus, such as the saying that the entire Jewish Law can be summarized as "Love the lord thy God with thy whole heart, and thy neighbour as thyself," attributed also I believe to Hillel.)

These stories and sayings circulated as uncontrolled oral tradition --

sayings and stories preserved in the usual way such things as jokes and proverbs are preserved -- not for the main purpose of preserving the actual teachings of an authoritative person, but because the substance of what was conveyed in them was found useful and wise in various occasions that arose. As this process continued, stories and sayings already in existence were retold, added to, altered, set in different contexts, and so on, to fit the needs of various different occasions that arose in these communities. The authors of the written documents that survive were basically piecing together collages of previously existing oral tradition, and in the process creating new contexts implicitly giving new meanings to older material. They most likely had no access to reliable knowledge of Jesus' actual teachings, and did not have in their minds modern standards of accurate reporting which makes us blame them for deliberate fabrications. They and their readers were more interested in great and inspiring fabrications than in accurate information (although, lacking modern objective historiography, they tended mistakenly to look on the inspiring character of the fabrication as evidence of its historical accuracy).

This is what you are up against, in my case at least. Suppose I gave you, for the sake of the argument, that we can exclude all the material you want to exclude. This to my mind still leaves a huge and to my mind intractable problem with the remaining material (1) devising criteria for separating sayings really stemming from Jesus, from sayings put into his mouth by others, and (2) deciding how these sayings were

connected to and related to each other, shedding light on each others' meaning, in the mind of Jesus. This is the source of my general skepticism of the whole project. It's not a general skepticism about all hypothesis-making, etc., it's based on a survey of the probable character of the available evidence. Any hypothesis about these issues is an empirical historical hypothesis about how to sift the surviving Jesus-material, and to convince me you would need to provide some empirical tests capable of verifying or falsifying any particular hypothesis about which sayings were his and how they were connected to each other in his mind. Perhaps you have devised some tests. I haven't seen this in your writing so far.

Or perhaps you think the situation with material connected with Jesus was less chaotic than I think it was. I guess we could discuss this further if you'd like. I haven't really revisited the issue since I reached this conclusion years ago, looking at the evidence and at the many attempts to recover the real Jesus that to my mind have run aground on this problem and prevented scholars from reaching any consensus.

Coming to miracle-working, this is not nearly as important in my mind. I along with most academic biblical scholars certainly think that the miraculous element increased and became greatly exaggerated in certain circles as time went on. Rudolf Bultmann, probably the most influential scripture scholar in the 20th century and still my favorite overall, also I think dismissed all miracle stories as later fabrications.

And to my mind, nothing important turns on the issue as to whether Jesus worked miracles or thought of himself as a miracle worker. Still, I find some problems with your thought on this subject which it may be well for you to consider.

First, you're right that I need to distinguish various kinds of "supernatural thought." I agree that it is highly unlikely that hardly anyone ever thinks they are actually at the moment walking on water or multiplying bread.

But you seem to be claiming that hardly anyone ever thinks they are healing or casting out demons by supernatural powers, or that their curses have power to damage things, or that magical means can affect the weather. This does seem an empirical claim about human beings in general. I think anthropologists would generally take issue with it, and you would have to contend with a considerable body of evidence that individuals in numerous cultures seem to think exactly this. (The fact that your claim about this seems so implausible to me is the reason I thought your view of Jesus could only be based on the assumption that he was a superior person.)

I'm still confused as to how you construe the structure of your argument. You say you are proposing an hypothesis which will then be tested to see if it turns out to be a true hypothesis. But the assertion that Jesus could not have thought he had miracle-working powers

does not seem to be something you are going to test against some specific evidence. It is not a hypothesis to be tested, but something we should take for granted before we examine any specific evidence about Jesus.

I think it is an empirical hypothesis that needs to be tested against evidence, but if I understand you right it is an hypothesis about the human race in general, so the evidence would have to be tested against reports about the range of things human beings are likely to think, when it comes to supernatural beings and powers.

Two other issues connected with supernatural thinking:

1. One major "supernatural belief" that might very plausibly be attributed to Jesus, possibly contrasting with Stoicism, is the general Jewish belief in "acts of God" in history. This is the idea that observable events and conditions (e.g. the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C., subsequent exile, restoration, pagan Greek and Roman rule, etc.) are signs of changes in the relation between God and Jews, or mankind in general. In its more extreme form this is the belief of some particular generation that they are living in the "end times," preceding a divinely engineered end of the world soon to come. This "millenarian" view was common in the Mediterranean world at the time of Jesus, especially among Jews (e.g. the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls), and has parallels in the reports of anthropologists among

other peoples in other eras.

Again I don't personally have a stake in any particular view as to how much this kind of thinking affected the mind of the actual Jesus. It is quite plausible that previously existing millenarian/apocalyptic groups were just one of the groups who put their views into the mouth of Jesus (different from Gnostics, who also put Gnostic sayings into Jesus' mouth). But given the evidence of many people around Jesus thinking this way, it seems exceedingly difficult to rule this one out on the grounds that hardly anyone ever thinks this way. When I mentioned a change in biblical scholarship from the 19th century view of Jesus as a rational philosopher, it was the work of scholars arguing that Jesus probably shared this apocalyptic view (not so much the miracle stories) that brought about the change.

2. You say "it is not remotely plausible that Jesus thought that he could arrive at his ethical views by miraculous means -- i.e. without having to have reasons for them."

I think you have a hard row to hoe on this one, if your argument is that hardly anyone anywhere ever thinks that ideas appearing in their minds are arriving there by some kind of unexplainable supernatural agency. Especially when you get specific about “having reasons” -- this seems to rule out simple good old “artistic inspiration,” common among poets, song-writers, novelists, musicians, etc., or just "flashes of

inspiration" that might on occasion occur to you and me.

Again it is one thing to say that it is unlikely that there actually is any supernatural agency behind such things. It is quite another thing to say that (1) people in general never have ideas that they have not arrived at through a slow process of thought, (2) people are always able to articulate reasons why they find some ideas persuasive and compelling, and (3) people never think that compelling ideas have arrived in their minds through some kind of supernatural agency.

In regards to (3): Perhaps you think that anytime anyone uses language involving supernatural powers or agencies, they can only be charlatans, using such language to fool other people? If this is your opinion, I would say, first, that in this case you still have to reckon with the possibility that Jesus was such a charlatan. But I think, secondly, you should consider another possibility: That many people worldwide, especially prior to the advent of modern science, freely used supernatural language and imagery to *interpret* experiences that seemed to them to go beyond the ordinary and exceed their powers of rational explanation. Of course this habit of thought and speech was able to be exploited by charlatans, but I would not conclude from this that everyone who uses this language must have been a charlatan. I would regard such language as always *interpretative of the felt meaning* of some experience, rather than genuine explanations of the cause of the experience (this distinction only became really clear with the

advent of modern science). But supernatural language provided many premodern peoples with a wide range of such interpretive terms to speak about how they felt about what they experienced.

I hope this helps. I'm just trying to give you my honest opinions about the difficulties I think your project faces. I may be on the sceptical end as academic biblical scholars go, but I think most of them would have similar difficulties with your methodology.

Beresford to Lafargue:

Dear Michael,

Thanks again for your letter.

I think your way of putting what Horsley and suchlike are doing is very clear, and I am in full agreement. Your idea is this, if I understand it: they allow Jesus to be as important as he is in the Gospels (which makes their own work on him very important) while also denying the truth of the Gospel account that makes him important in that way. So they want him to be a very special authority for their own views — e.g., for Marxist views — while simultaneously denying that he has any special authority.

I am now also in agreement with you about miracles. The only

difference between us is one of caution. I'm prepared to be less cautious than you in making guesses about what Jesus probably did and did not believe about himself. I think you're far too cautious, and reluctant to believe things that are very probable, on the insufficient grounds that they *might* be false. Your 'let's wait and see' approach involves so much waiting and so little seeing that we'll all be dead before we get round to making any claims. I agree that we need to take care of the possibilities, but a *possibility* that never graduates into a *probability* upon further investigation is not something that we need to worry about.

I still disagree about the idea of *criteria* and *hypotheses*. Here are some responses.

I assume that *earlier sources can be reasonably expected to give us better information most of the time.* It does not seem fair to make this very modest assumption seem unreasonable by overstating it in the way you do. My version of this assumption really is very hard to reject. If you wanted information about Shakespeare, which would you prefer, a biography written in 1620, or one written in 1800? Why? If you wanted an authentic text of Hamlet, which would you prefer out of two very different versions, a signed 1609 copy of Hamlet, or a version that can only be traced as far back as 1750? Why?

Lf: Some of your language seems to suggest that there did exist at some

point a reliable source of knowledge about Jesus' teaching, which the authors of surviving documents could have used if they wanted, and should have used, instead of knowingly fabricating false pictures.

I believe that collections of sayings, written and oral, existed before Mark and Matthew and Thomas. Those writers seem very clearly to have drawn from such sources. That is, they *did* use these materials. But in some cases they evidently misunderstood them. Thomas gives no or virtually no interpretations, and for that reason alone is less able to misinterpret sayings. Sections of Matthew and Mark are similar in lacking extra material around the sayings. I don't think that Mark should be accused of knowingly fabricating false contexts. In the example I gave — the Beelzebub story — I think that Mark or someone took those two sayings and overenthusiastically determined that they had something to do with Jesus' power to expell demons, which he no doubt also honestly believed in. But I also think that if he had just reported the sayings from his source as he found them, without the demon context, nobody would now share his view that they had something to do with demons. I think he was honest, but sloppy.

I believe in the existence of Q. But I have noticed that some scholars want Q to be the *only* reliable source for Jesus, and to use that claim to exclude the 'kingdom' material. I wouldn't make any such claim or try to make our speculations about sources do so much work. I agree

with you that the whole thing is a mess. But whereas as you see a hopeless mess, I see an exciting project. For me, there is a clear distinction between *sayings* and *anecdotes*; between material with philosophical content (sometimes only potential) that are apparently claims made *by* Jesus, and the various kinds of claims *about* Jesus. I think that we should try to include as much of the former as possible in any overall interpretation. For me, that would include all the non-Q parables. In fact I think the kingdom parables are some of the best and most interesting material. But I also think that it's fine to care much less about including the anecdotal material.

On the other hand, I also believe that even the anecdotal material often contains authentic sayings (as in the Beelzebub case) or at least needs to be, and can be, accounted for in some satisfying way. For instance, miracle stories often seem to be transformed sayings or parables. Surely you must have noticed how often miracles mimic sayings in content? Consider these parallels:

Saying or parable	**Miracle**
Big-fish parable (Thomas); fish parable (Matthew); Jesus makes disciples 'fishers of men' (John)	Jesus makes disciples miraculously catch fish
'Bread of the Pharisees'; bread as symbol of teaching	Jesus miraculously serves bread
Jesus 'intoxicates' his disciples (Thomas)	Jesus miraculously makes wine

Lazarus parable; old man dies, talks to us from the afterlife	Lazarus miracle; old man dies, comes back to life
Jesus is doctor to sinners; he 'heals' sinners	Jesus miraculously heals the sick
Sayings of trees bearing fruit; reaping; mustard tree; of being ready when God calls	Jesus is rude to a tree which doesn't bear fruit, miraculously kills it
'They have ears but do not hear; they have eyes but do not see'; 'Let those who have ears listen!'	Jesus makes the *actually* blind see, the *actually* deaf hear.
Jesus saves us from spiritual death; gives spiritual life (*passim*)	Jesus brings *actually* dead people back to life

Lf: Does your reconstruction of Jesus' use of the specific sayings you deal with depend on a hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas is relying on a document which can be relied on to give us only the actual sayings of Jesus and also indicate how these sayings were connected with each other in his mind?

No. It does not depend on that hypothesis. At most, I take the fact that Thomas' version of the saying matches the more intuitive and natural reading to be one, small piece of independent evidence for that reading. Thomas on his own can't secure those conclusions. The *ten* or so independent pieces of evidence for the conclusions about the two sayings (and the Beelzebub context) do, together, make a

good case. These were

(1) The ‘two masters’ saying (*Synoptic & Thomas*) that seems easily to bear a similar meaning to one of the sayings.
(2) The ‘rich man/camel’ saying (*Synoptic*) that seems easily to bear a similar meaning to one of the sayings.
(3) The house on the rock saying (*Synoptic*) that seems intuitively to contain a similar metaphor and to be discussing similar ideas.
(4) The pearl, treasure, and fish parables, which strongly imply the idea of renunciation of our other goals in favour of our devotion to God — and therefore imply, again, the same idea of impossibility of balancing the two kinds of goals.
(5) The thieves-breaking-in saying (*Synoptic & Thomas*) that seems to have a similar meaning, and to use similar imagery, to the second Beelzebub saying.
(7) The fact that Thomas reports the second saying without Beelzebub.
(8) The fact that Thomas gives a longer, more complete version of the saying that has a meaning similar to that of the other (*Synoptic*) sayings.
(9) The fact that Jesus didn’t have power over Beelzebub, and therefore *probably* didn’t think that he did.
(10) The fact that the sayings, in themselves, give not even the slightest hint of the Beelzebub meaning.

These ten independent facts make my conclusions *plausible*. No single

one of them has to be carrying the whole burden, and no special weight is placed on the authenticity of Thomas. In fact I rely on synoptic sayings more than Thomas sayings. Rather, this is a cumulative argument, designed to show several independent considerations combine to make the Beelzebub story look like a fabrication.

As far as I can tell, nothing that you raised in your reply takes anything at all away from the plausibility of the detailed arguments that I gave for the reading of these particular sayings. You haven't addressed those arguments. You raise a few vague alternative possibilities, without arguing for them, and fail to provide any detailed reading that you think is more plausible.

Lf: I just don't see how one could show that the different context you suppose for the saying interprets the saying in the way Jesus did, and wasn't just due to some other person's fabricated context, either Thomas or his source.

I didn't suppose a context at all. Therefore there is no possibility of the context I supposed being fabricated. I also used several considerations, not just Thomas, so there is no possibility that Thomas alone would be responsible for generating the whole case for my conclusion (surely that was obvious?) I argued that the saying in conjunction with, and in the light of, several others (mostly from the *synoptics*) should probably

be taken that way. Those several other sayings do *not* constitute a context, as such. They are just the sayings themselves. They constitute excellent evidence — the best that we have — for what Jesus thought and how he used certain images. The sayings lend themselves to that meaning on their own, without context. All that you could mean by 'fabrication' in this case is fabrication *of those other sayings themselves.*

We might, of course, suppose that all those sayings are 'fabricated', as you may be suggesting. But (a) I don't see why we would have any positive reason to think that, and (b) I don't even see what it means. If some person — call him Joseph — 'fabricated', i.e., authored, the set of sayings that I am discussing and interpreting, well fine: then it is Joseph's sayings that I turn out to be discussing. If you want me to think that those particular sayings that I mentioned and used in my argument probably (not possibly, but probably) have several different authors, then give me an argument. Give me some positive reason to think that this is the case. Until then, there is just a possibility, and a mere possibility is nothing. Yes, I might be wrong. And you might be wrong. And even Dan Brown might be right. So what?

Lf: For example, this saying sounds to me like it could easily be a folk saying, able to be used in many different contexts, not all of them moral or religious. If you don't have a theory about this, I think you probably need one, and some evidence to back it up.

Wrong. I don't need a theory, *you* do. The burden is on you here. I am looking at eleven sayings attributed by several sources to Jesus. I am taking that attribution as a perfectly good *prima facie* reason for treating them as the coherent products of a single thinker. You say one of them 'sounds like a folk saying'. That simply isn't good enough. If you want to give me reason to abandon the good *prima facie* case, you have to do a lot more than that. Show me that it is more plausible that one of the eight sayings attributed to Jesus, apparently similar in content, is in fact by someone else. Without seeing an argument, why should we care about this possibility?

Lf: It's not enough to say that Mark's use of the proverbs is his own construction, or even to say that Thomas is probably relying on an earlier written source. Don't you also need to show that this earlier written source probably contains only sayings from Jesus, and gives them the interpretation he gave them?

No. First, that wasn't what I was saying. The core of the argument was to do with the coherence and similarity of the several sayings. An interpretative argument based on coherence, plausible intuitive meaning, strong connections of style and imagery, and consistency of ideas across many independent sayings, is perfectly sound. In fact, you have it backwards. We don't need to prove, by some historical means, that the sayings are all by Jesus before we can assume that they fit together. Rather, finding plausible coherence is itself one very good

criterion for authenticity. This something we all take for granted all the time. In the absence of certainty of attribution, say, in the case of a disputed work of Plato, we would naturally point to strong discrepancies in the ideas as a reason against authenticity, and strong coherence as pointing towards authenticity. In a disputed work attributed to Shakespeare, we point to coherence of style and diction as a reason for the attribution, and discrepancies of style as a reason against it. This is especically so in the case of philosophical ideas, which can provide much stronger connections than we can hope to derive from style or language alone. Thoughts of this kind are a kind of mental fingerprint when they are detailed enough.

Lf: Any hypothesis about these issues is an empirical historical hypothesis about how to sift the surviving Jesus-material, and to convince me you would need to provide some empirical tests capable of verifying or falsifying any particular hypothesis about which sayings were his and how they were connected to each other in his mind. Perhaps you have devised some tests. I haven't seen this in your writing so far.

That is because you do not accept coherency and connection and satisfactory meanings as a valid 'test' of authenticity. If you did, then you would see that my entire argument was based around what seems to me a very reasonable and powerful test of authenticity. Obvious coherence and consistency (in conjunction with our other criteria) implies single authorship. Single authorship, in this case, is what we

really mean by ‘authenticity’.

I think you set the bar far too high. You’re saying that the only possible test is the discovery of a miraculous film, made by some time traveller, of the real Jesus actually delivering his sayings. That seems to be a test designed to ensure that it cannot be passed, so that the project of interpreting the sayings must be abandoned, which is the outcome you have been set on since before the start of our discussion. For that matter, even such a film would probably not be enough for you. You could always point out that Jesus may be acting in the film; perhaps he was being ironic; perhaps he is reading cue cards written by ten other people; how do we know that that’s what he really thinks, just because we see him saying it? — and so on and so on. If we are determined to be sceptical, then we can easily insist that there is no such thing as reliable evidence for what anybody else thinks about anything, ever, period. But in every other area of historical interpretation, my less pessimistic criteria for dealing with this quantity of attributed material (over two hundred sayings) are considered just fine. We employ the same methods in interpreting Empedocles, Parmenides, Zeno, Democritus, Epicurus and many others.

Lf: I'm still confused as to how you construe the structure of your argument. You say you are proposing a hypothesis, which will then be tested to see if it turns out to be a true hypothesis. But the assertion that Jesus could not have thought he had miracle-working powers does not seem to be something you are going to test against some specific evidence. It is not a

hypothesis to be tested, but something we should take for granted before we examine any specific evidence about Jesus.

It is a hypothesis, and it certainly can be tested. Let me show how this is so. But before that let me point out a very odd confusion in what you say here. You say "it is not a hypothesis to be tested, but *something we should take for granted before we examine any specific evidence*." But that's exactly what a hypothesis *is*. It is something you (provisionally) adopt *prior to* an examination of some body of evidence. It is an assumption that provides a way of looking at evidence, which may then be strengthened or weakened depending on what you find in the evidence. What else did you think a hypothesis was? Your objection is like this: 'Your assertion doesn't seem to be a hypothesis, rather it seems to be a mere *hypothesis*.'

Here's how it works in this case:

Suppose Jesus thought he had magical epistemic powers. Then we predict that he would have made some claims based on his (imagined) magical epistemic powers.

Suppose Jesus *did not think* he had magical epistemic powers. Then we predict that he would *not* have made claims based on imagined magical epistemic powers.

(Note: I regard the second hypothesis as much better on independent grounds. Jesus is unlikely to have attributed magical knowledge to himself. But from here we leave that to one side, to avoid circularity.)

Now we test the two possibilities. Let's look and see, in the light of our two predictions. Let's examine the sayings that are supposed to provide the evidence that he attributed magical knowledge to himself, and see if they plausibly do or do not really require that self-attribution of magical knowledge. Let's also look for suspicious circumstances, such as alterations, discrepant versions of the same sayings, etc. If the sayings cannot be easily be given some non-magical meaning (without distortion, circularity, and question-begging) then we will have found some support for the first hypothesis. I.e., it will look as if he really did attribute magical knowledge to himself. If we *can* plausibly give them up some non-magical meaning, and if we find suspicious alterations, and so on, then we will have found some support for the second hypothesis.

As we go on and on in this way we collect evidence for or against the two hypotheses.

Consider eschatological sayings. They rely on magical epistemic powers. Only someone with such powers knows exactly how the world will end thousands of years from now and exactly how people will be treated by God when it does. So we can test our hypothesis as follows:

Are the eschatological sayings in the corpus trouble-free? Are they unambiguous? Do they ever suggest easy non-eschatological readings? Are they internally suspicious in any way? Is the eschatological reading of them the easiest and most natural? Do they show signs of tampering?

Here are some results of this kind of examination: Take the 'kingdom' parables, which are supposed to be eschatological. These are *highly* suspect as eschatological sayings. They are full of strange and obvious problems. In several cases the eschatological readings of them are clumsy, forced, and almost self-evidently wrong. The pearl, the mustard seed, the treasure, the leaven bread — none of these sayings looks remotely eschatological, or gives any evidence at all, in themselves, that Jesus attributed magical knowledge to himself. There are excellent independent reasons for thinking that they are not eschatological. Consider the mustard seed saying:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

Elsewhere the 'kingdom of heaven' is taken to refer, in some way or other, to the afterlife or to 'end times'. But trying applying that sense

of the phrase here. You get plain nonsense. The afterlife starts out very small then becomes very big? The fiery destruction of the world is like a mustard seed? On the other hand, a non-eschatological reading is natural and easy. 'The *basileia* [power] or heaven [i.e., the power of God]' starts out small and develops into something large and important. God's power over us is a kind of potential, like the potential in a seed; and when fully developed it grows into something that is more important than anything else in our lives, and that sustains all our other concerns.

Incidentally, in this case Jesus seems to be in part using the impressive and mysterious power of biological objects as a more direct illustration of God's power. A mustard seed is a tiny speck, but by God's miraculous foresight and by the secret complexity of his power it transforms into a whole tree. In pre-Darwinian times this is an eloquent demonstration of God's astonishing powers. I think two ideas run side by side here: (1) biology reveals God's power directly, and (2) God's power over the human soul is closely analogous to the miraculous and secret workings of other living things. It is the second idea that makes the saying a parable or simile, as opposed to a mere example of God's power.

This may be the right reading. Or it may not. But either way, it seems clear that nothing in the mustard seed parable suggests *eschatology* — not even remotely. The same is true of the pearl and treasure and

leaven bread — three other ‘kingdom’ parables.

That is just what our second hypothesis predicted. Thus, we have some evidence in favour of that hypothesis. Note: It could easily have been otherwise. Those kingdom sayings (the pearl, treasure, mustard seed, leaven bread) might not be in the corpus, and instead we might just have had overtly eschatological sayings. Thus, we are not arguing in a circle. Those sayings really *are* very hard to read as eschatological — as our second hypothesis predicted *before we took any note of them.*

Here’s another example.

There’s another kingdom parable in Thomas that goes like this:

‘A [wise?] man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of little fish. Among them the wise fisherman discovered a fine large fish. He threw all the little fish back into the sea, and easily chose the large fish. Anyone here with two good ears should listen!

Notice that it is virtually identical to the pearl and treasure parables in the synoptics. Man finds pearl, sells everything he has for the pearl. Man finds treasure, sells everything to get the treasure. Man finds big fish, throws away all the other fish for the big fish. I think the meaning of all three sayings is very likely to be something like this:

When you discover the value of righteousness, and of being subject to the will of God, everything else in life is revealed as trivial in comparison. The wise man is willing to sacrifice everything else (riches, status, comfort) for the sake of righteousness.

In the synoptics, what seems to be a *version* of the same parable comes immediately after the pearl and treasure parables. The synoptic version is:

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.

Now, in this form, the parable can no longer have the same meaning as the pearl or treasure parables that immediately precede it, or as the big-fish parable from Thomas. Instead of the clear idea expressed by those parables, that God's power is something of *immense value*, for which we *give up everything else* in life, this is now an eschatological saying. Matthew rams the meaning home with his own explicit interpretation of the parable:

This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing

furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

I am suspicious of this eschatological version, for two reasons so far. (1) The Thomas version looks as if it has the same meaning as the pearl and treasure sayings found in the synoptics; that's quite a good reason for thinking (on Matthew's own evidence) that it is the authentic version; (2) the position of Matthew's fish parable shows that it is connected, in the common source of the sayings, with the pearl and treasure sayings and is thus a version of the Thomas big-fish parable. Thomas's big fish evidently goes with pearl and treasure by sense; Matthew's fish parable goes with the pearl and treasure by position. It comes right after the pearl and treasure, and more importantly, Matthew does not have the big-fish parable. These several facts show that the big-fish has been replaced with the hell-fire fish.

Thus we have two versions of the same 'kingdom' saying. One of them is eschatological, one of them is not. But which version is authentic? Well, the Thomas version (the big fish) already looks much more likely to be authentic, because it so closely matches the pearl and treasure. But further details make this a near certainty:

In the Thomas version, the fisherman keeps the one big fish, and throws back the small ones. This is exactly what fishermen do. They throw back small fish — fish that are too small to eat — and keep big ones. They especially keep really big ones. Note that they throw small

fish back, so that they can catch them later. Also, keeping and prizing the big fish, and throwing back the others, nicely and easily represents the wise man's valuing righteousness, and giving up everything else for it. This is well crafted, neat, clear, and makes perfect sense.

In the Matthew version, the fishermen throw away bad fish. What are bad fish? Fish that have gone bad? No, because all the fish are alive and equally fresh. Fish that we can't eat? Perhaps, but in practice fisherman keep any fish big enough to eat. Also, when fishermen use small nets from small boats they typically catch a school of the same species of fish. In that case the only criteria for selecting or discarding fish is their size. Conversely, what is a 'good' fish? An ethically good fish? Obviously not. A fresh fish? No: all the fish are fresh. A fish big enough to eat? No; that would be a big fish. The parable simply doesn't make internal sense any more. Also, notice that the fishermen throw back the 'bad' fish, which go back into the nice cool water and survive. They keep the 'good' fish, which are roasted in an oven and eaten. This is a ridiculous way of saying that at the end of time some people (the unlucky fish that get cooked and eaten) will be sent to heaven while others (the lucky fish that survive) will be sent to hell. It's especially clumsy that being thrown back represents being cooked at the end of time, when it is in fact the good fish, not the bad fish, that get cooked.

In short, this version appears to be nonsense, and gives several signs

of being a garbled and messed up version of the big-fish parable — and all the evidence for that is independent of our prior suspicion of eschatology. This is a smoking gun: an inferior, silly, eschatological re-working of what was a *non*-eschatological saying — giving us excellent evidence that the eschatological reading of the 'kingdom' parables was a later fabrication.

We have also thereby eliminated one small piece of the evidence for the more general hypothesis that Jesus attributed magical epistemic powers to himself, in so far as eschatological beliefs are a major part of the magical cognitive powers of the Jesus of the Gospels. And there is more here than just the discounting of one eschatological saying. The eschatological version of the fish parable is a clumsy fake. So we have not only removed one piece of evidence for eschatology, we have also raised the suspicion of wider fakery that casts the whole genre into at least some doubt. If the particular Christian sect of which the Gospel writers were part could cook up one eschatological saying, isn't it likely that they fabricated others?

In this way, the hypothesis I mentioned above really can gather support. We did not arrive at these findings only because we are already against eschatology. If the evidence I have just recounted hadn't been there, we wouldn't have found it. We found it because it is there. It might have been otherwise. There might only have been several clearly eschatological, well-crafted similes.

Lafargue to Beresford:

Dear Adam,

Thanks for your reply. I haven't finished studying carefully everything you wrote. Perhaps at some point we can get into details. For the moment I'm still trying to grasp the main outlines of your methodology, its suppositions and its logic. Below I describe three suppositions that I get from your writing. You can tell me if I've understood you rightly:

(1). If we free our minds of biases (especially church biases and supernatural beliefs) there is some relatively obvious natural intuitive way of reading the sayings and parables attributed to Jesus that would be intuitively obvious to everyone.

(2). These natural intuitive meanings are the meanings that individual sayings or parables have if understood completely free of any context.

(3). These obvious natural meanings of context-free individual sayings are the clue to Jesus' mind.

If these represent your position, I have the following comments:

As to (1): I think even after we eliminate church/supernatural biases, there is still lots of room for intelligent people to interpret individual sayings differently. Particularly when it comes to suggestive, metaphorical, and aphoristic speech -- most speech of this kind *requires* some specific suppositions to understand the speaker's meaning. Think of what it would take for a foreigner to understand the usual point of the aphorism “It takes two to tango.”

(2). Individual sayings free of context generally need some context before they acquire meaning specific enough to actually be of use in guiding a person's life. Perhaps I have not been clear enough in what I mean by "contextualizing" the sayings. Perhaps you understand this as putting a given saying in some concrete context, a story or the social context of Jesus in Israel. I intend “context” in a broader way, which includes connecting individual sayings to each other, particular sayings in particular relationships which helps interpret each, as well as bringing in some other categories or issues to make specific what might otherwise be an ambiguous saying. Below I give some examples of the way you seem to be contextualizing some sayings in this way, in your earlier discussion of some sayings connected with the "kingdom divided against itself" saying. This is exactly what I think needs to be done to give these sayings specific meanings -- but then that gets us back into what I think is one of the main difficulties: how to know how

these sayings were contextualized in the mind of Jesus. Also: Ultimately, to support your thesis that Jesus taught Stoic doctrines, aren't you going to have to contextualize all the individual sayings in the context of Stoic thought?

(3). Even if #1 and #2 were not problematic in themselves, why should we think that applying these two criteria is the key to getting at the mind of some individual person, Jesus? Even in the unlikely event that everyone today with no church-biases would agree on some "natural" meaning of the sayings, why is this evidence that Jesus must have attached this meaning to them? How could we know ahead of time that Jesus had no specific overall worldview in the context of which each saying and parable acquired specific meanings?

In general, it seems to me you keep trying to address an historical/empirical question about the mind of an individual person Jesus, by the use of *purely philosophical* arguments, rather than historical/empirical evidence.

++

Some examples of the way you seem to contextualize some sayings to give them specific meanings. I'm quoting what you said in your previous letter:

You say:

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into God's power [i.e., to be ruled by God].

I suppose you change "enter into God's Kingdom" to "into God's power" in order to eliminate the eschatological element. I would say when doing this you are not de-contextualizing the saying, but recontextualizing it - "being ruled by God" is a specific idea which you are connecting to the saying in order to explicate its meaning. I notice you do something similar with another saying as well, "Store up treasures in heaven [i.e., with God]." I guess this is because you regard "God" as a less problematic notion than "heaven" -- but is this evidence that Jesus could not have believed in a heaven where treasures could be stored up?

You say:

Surely the first saying above ["A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand"] likewise could be a version of this same idea: a house -- i.e. a man's soul cannot be divided against itself (a man cannot have two competing goals).

I would regard this as contextualizing the saying in a particular way, by interpreting "kingdom" as a reference to the soul of man.

When you say that "built on sand" means "devoted to riches and other superficial and empty goals" I regard this as one particular way of contextualizing the saying. To imagine another equally plausible context in Jesus' life: "Built on sand" refers to beliefs or teachings different from those that Jesus stands for. This of course makes "built on a rock" somewhat self-referential, so it requires some further contextualization, some knowledge of exactly what Jesus does stand for. But how can we know that Jesus would never have contrasted his teaching with others' teaching in this particular way using this particular image?

Beresford to Lafargue:

Dear Michael,

My three principles, if I were stating them myself, would look more like this:

(1) In our study of the history of philosophy in general, we often claim that some interpretations are more plausible than others. Perhaps this sometimes may also apply to some of the sayings of Jesus.

(2) The sayings of Jesus should not necessarily be assigned the meaning that they are given by the Gospel writers, and in some cases,

we have good reasons to reject that assigned meaning.

(3) It reasonable to think that a good proportion of the sayings attributed to Jesus are indeed the product of one mind. In that case, we might operate on the tentative assumption that they will make good sense and compliment each other. Also, it follows that when we make claims about 'better interpretations' we are, I suppose, claiming that those better interpretations are more likely to be what Jesus actually thought.

(3*) That is, if we believe in truth in something like the common sense way, then I suppose we believe that there at least is such a thing as what Jesus actually thought.

Beyond these modest assumptions, I agree fully with everything you say and are aware of the great difficulties. It's far better to discuss the sayings case by case than to argue over endlessly over methodology. All we need to do is eliminate absurdity from the methodology, and the investigation can begin. By ‘context-free’ I meant without the surrounding anecdotal or explicitly interpretative material. I didn't mean ‘without assigning them any meaning at all.’ By ‘contextualisation’ you seem to mean ‘interpretation’; in fact, you seem to mean ‘the process of giving them some meaning or other.’ That isn't what I meant by ‘context-free’. I take it for granted that we cannot interpret the sayings without giving them a meaning.

My point was that the Beelzebub story provides a context — in the usual sense — that gives those sayings a particular meaning. The other sayings I cited do not have contexts giving them their meaning in that way. That's all I was saying. I agree that I interpret *'basileia'* ('kingdom') a certain way; and likewise I admit to all the interpretations you set out below. I believe they are correct and can be argued for convincingly. The readings of 'kingdom' and 'heaven' are both *linguistic* points, not interpretative points in the usual sense, and they are certainly not 'contextual' points. 'Basileia' *does not mean* 'kingdom.' That's just the same as saying that 'sand' in the sand parable does not mean 'ice' or 'cheese'. It would make no sense to call such a claim 'contextualisation.' 'Heaven' is regularly used by Jesus as metonymy for God (in fact, 'heaven's *basileia*' often appears as 'God's *basileia'* and the two are treated as the Gospel writers as synonymous); there are overwhelmingly strong reasons, linguistic, textual, and scholarly, for thinking that this is so. This is not 'decontextualizing'. I have not removed the saying from context if I assert that the saying as it stands does not contain the English word 'kingdom' or a Greek word that means 'kingdom'. That is not 'decontextualisation', it's just fact. Likewise I am saying that, as a matter of philological fact, 'heaven' stands for God. 'Decontextualizing' if it is to be a useful idea ought to mean taking it out of its context. I decontextualised the Beelzubub sayings, because I believe that the Gospel writers contextualised them in an unhelpful

way.

The overall style of your objections is the same as before. Again your repeated question is ‘But how do we KNOW that such and such?’ Again, that simply isn't a good enough objection. I am not arguing about what we *know*, and neither should you be. We are discussing what is plausible, and what reasonable people should believe.

Example:

*But **how can we know** that Jesus would never have contrasted his teaching with others' teaching in this particular way using this particular image?”*

Yes, Jesus *might* be talking about his own teachings. That's absolutely fine. We don’t *know* that he isn't. But so what? In the absence of an argument for why he *probably is* talking about his own teachings, nothing is yet being offered here, and there is no opposition to the various good reasons I gave for thinking that he probably isn't. You claim that your idea is ‘equally plausible’ but it simply isn’t. It strikes me as implausible, and uncharitable, for exactly the reason you give yourself: the saying would then be self-referential and contentless. Do you have an actual *argument* to the effect that he is only talking about his own teachings? Do you have a theory as to what those teachings are that he is referring to here, and why they could naturally be compared to a rock, and why his rivals’ teachings are like sand? When

you come up with an argument for this reading and a detailed explanation of the saying, I will then examine it and see if it is better than mine. Until then I will stick with what seems the most likely explanation. You can't overthrow a claim about what is plasuible by saying that somewhere out there there might be some other possibility: you have to show that some detailed alternative is *more plausible*.

Do you think that these problems apply to all of the many ancient philosophers whose work survives only in fragments and second-hand attributions, or just Jesus? If not to all of them, why not? If to all of them, why isn't the whole project of being a historian of philosophy, in such cases, a hopeless and pointless task? Surely the same arguments must apply to all the pre-Socratic philosophers, most of the Hellenistic philosophers, and many others. But these people are all widely studied, and they are not treated as fictional characters whose real views are beyond recovery.