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JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER

The Moral Sage in the Synoptic Gospels



Runar M. Thorsteinsson

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RUNAR M. THORSTEINSSON

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I wish to dedicate this book to my mother, Rut Meldal Valtýsdóttir.

Runar M. Thorsteinsson

Reykjavík
June 2017

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin/New York, 1972–
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
EC	<i>Early Christianity</i>
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JR	<i>The Journal of Religion</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JTS	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KNT	Kommentar till Nya testamentet
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddel, H. G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones, A Greek–English Lexicon. 9th edn with revised supplement. Oxford, 1996
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OSAP	<i>Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy</i>
SBLAB	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBSBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
SCHNT	Studia ad corpus hellenisticum Novi Testamenti

SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum/Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity
SVF	<i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i> . H. von Arnim. 4 vols. Leipzig, 1903–24
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964–76
ThH	Théologie Historique
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
TLNT	Theological Lexicon of the New Testament. C. Spicq. Translated and edited by J. D. Ernest. 3 vols. Peabody, MA, 1994
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
YCS	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction

Purpose and Approach

The words of Socrates, for some strange reason, still endure and will endure for all time, though he himself did not write or leave behind him either a treatise or a will.

(Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 54.4)

THE PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE STUDY

Largely due to the age-old Judaism/Hellenism divide and the distinction traditionally made between theology and philosophy, Jesus of Nazareth, as a Jew and ‘son of God’, is usually associated with Jewish/theological as opposed to Hellenistic/philosophical thought and way of life. Recent research has shown that this ‘Jerusalem vs. Athens’ distinction is highly misleading and results in some very unfortunate invitations to anachronism. Long before the time of Jesus, large areas of Palestine/Israel/Judea were deeply influenced by Hellenistic thought and way of life, as were most areas around the Mediterranean, and the distinction between theology (or religion) and philosophy is by and large a modern phenomenon, virtually alien to the ancients. However, while many, if not most, New Testament scholars would probably agree with these new insights, few have fully brought them into play with respect to the person of Jesus. As literature, most of the New Testament writings have been well studied in their Graeco-Roman context, but when it comes to the portrayal of Jesus himself in these writings, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, the scholarly landscape proves to be quite different. It appears that the closer one gets to the person of Jesus, the stronger the grip of the traditional Judaism/Hellenism divide

and the stronger the denial that early Christianity had anything to do with philosophy.

To be sure, there are some valuable studies available related to the subject of Jesus and ancient philosophy, but these are relatively few and some of them rest on rather weak methodological foundations. The problem facing New Testament scholarship in this area is primarily hermeneutical and has to do with the perspective and mind set of the interpreters themselves who carry out (or do not carry out) the research. Despite all scholarly willingness to move beyond the traditional Judaism/Hellenism divide, there is still a great reluctance among scholars to bring philosophy in as a relevant aspect of New Testament exegesis. And some of those who do bring in philosophy as such seem rather uncertain about how exactly to approach the subject. A recent book entitled *Jesus and Philosophy* (2009) mirrors this problem well: in his preface to the book, the editor rightly states that ‘no substantial scholarly book has been devoted to the topic of Jesus and philosophy’.¹ The editor then informs his readers that this particular book ‘fills this gap in the literature of philosophy’ and ‘offers wide-ranging substantial coverage that will be of interest to philosophers and to other readers, including scholars and students in theology, religious studies, and history’. And yet, out of five chapters that deal with ‘Jesus in his first-century thought context’, including the general introduction of the book, only two chapters really discuss the topic of Jesus and philosophy.² Somewhat ironically, not even the editor’s (primarily historically oriented) introduction, entitled ‘Introduction: Jesus and Philosophy’, deals with the question—it contains much about Jesus, but not much about Jesus *and philosophy*.³ There is clearly a need for further research in this neglected aspect of early Christianity, research that is open-minded not only towards a ‘theological Jesus’ but also towards a ‘philosophical Jesus’.

The main purpose and aim of the present study, then, is to make some contribution to such research by examining the ways in which early Christian authors may have associated Jesus of Nazareth/Jesus

¹ Paul K. Moser (ed.), *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vii.

² The two chapters are those of Luke Timothy Johnson (see section ‘What Is Addressed and What Is Not?’) and Paul W. Gooch (who deals with the apostle Paul’s understanding of Christ).

³ Paul K. Moser, ‘Introduction: Jesus and Philosophy’, in *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays* (ed. P. K. Moser; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–23.

Christ with contemporary philosophical schools and figures and used such associations to persuade their audience that Jesus was not only on a par with these philosophical figures, but also superior to them: that Jesus was in every way the ideal human being. The study concerns both what Jesus did and what he said (or is said to have said). Rather than simply serving as interesting parallels, the Graeco-Roman texts referred to and discussed are primarily used as a means to better understand the Gospels' portrait of Jesus. The main focus of attention is pointed at the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels themselves. To the best of my knowledge, there is no thorough study available today that deals with the subject under discussion as defined in the next section.⁴

WHAT IS ADDRESSED AND WHAT IS NOT? JESUS OF THE GOSPELS AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS

But there is another problem facing New Testament scholarship in this respect, in addition to the underlying hermeneutical problem. There is also a methodological one, namely, the problem of how to deal properly with our (lack of) sources on Jesus. It has to do with the question of whether we decide to focus on the 'historical Jesus' or the figure of Jesus as narrated in early Christian texts.

One scholar in particular has addressed the question of the relationship between the historical Jesus and contemporary philosophers. In a number of studies, F. Gerald Downing has argued that Jesus of Nazareth, i.e. the historical Jesus, can best be understood in analogy to the Cynic teacher.⁵ Pointing to a number of impressive parallels

⁴ Translations of biblical texts follow (mostly) the NRSV. Unless otherwise noted, translations of classical texts follow the LCL.

⁵ See, in particular, F. Gerald Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992). See also Bernhard Lang, *Jesus der Hund: Leben und Lehre eines jüdischen Kynikers* (Munich: Beck, 2010); F. Gerald Downing, 'Jesus among the Philosophers: The Cynic Connection Explored and Affirmed, with a Note on Philo's Jewish-Cynic Philosophy', in *Religio-Philosophical Discourses in the Mediterranean World: From Plato, through Jesus, to Late Antiquity* (ed. A. Klostergaard Petersen and G. van Kooten; Ancient Philosophy & Religion 1; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 187–218; John Moles, 'Cynic Influence upon First-Century Judaism and Early Christianity?' in *The Limits of Ancient*

between the sayings of Jesus and the sayings of Cynic philosophers, and providing a helpful overview of the (potential) presence of Cynicism in and around Galilee at the time of Jesus, Downing has contributed much to the scholarly discussion. However, as Hans Dieter Betz has rightly pointed out, there are several serious methodological shortcomings in Downing's studies, among which are our lack of sources on Cynicism, as well as the tendency of Downing to co-opt any text that mentions the Cynics with approval as a pristine specimen of Cynicism (e.g. Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus).⁶ An even larger problem, I would add, has to do with the sources on the historical Jesus. Like Socrates, the philosophical sage par excellence, Jesus did not write anything himself (as far as we know). Instead, our knowledge of him is intimately bound to the ancient Christian writings and authors who tell his story, a story that is deeply shaped by the authors' own faith in him as the promised Messiah and 'son of God'. That does not necessarily mean that we cannot know anything about the historical Jesus. There are indeed some criteria in use in New Testament scholarship that may help us draw some plausible conclusions about his actual words and way of life.⁷ Also, the question of Jesus' social context—and especially his relationship to neighbouring philosophical schools—is highly germane to the present study. However, the difficulties involved in attempting to determine which sayings do or do not come from Jesus himself, and exactly how he lived, are enormous.⁸ The collections of sayings that we find, for instance, in the Synoptic Gospels, which are arguably the best sources available in this respect, are not easily removed from their narrative context, which in turn is determined by the text's overall purpose and argumentative structure. Hence, while certainly worth carrying out, undertakings

Biography (ed. B. McGing and J. Mossman; Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 89–116. Cf. also the independent but in many ways similar approach in Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁶ Hans Dieter Betz, 'Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis', *JR* 74 (1994): 453–75.

⁷ See, e.g. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Volume 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991); Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (trans. M. E. Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁸ See, e.g. the critical discussion in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 1996).

such as Downing's studies of Jesus and the Cynics remain rather speculative in substance. A more methodologically sound and thus more promising approach is to focus on the philosophical context of the 'literary' or 'narrative' Jesus; that is, Jesus as portrayed by, in this case, the Synoptic Gospels.

Luke Timothy Johnson has recently suggested four appropriate ways to approach the topic of Jesus (of the canonical Gospels) and philosophy, depending in part on the question of what is meant by 'philosophy' (what is meant by 'philosophy' in the present study is discussed in Chapter 1).⁹ One approach is what he terms 'the historical Jesus as sage', which corresponds closely to the approach taken by Downing and others, in which Jesus is considered as a historical figure whose sayings in the Gospels are used as a basis for comparing him with contemporary philosophical sages (Johnson himself is sceptical towards this approach, precisely for the methodological reasons mentioned above). Another approach is to focus on how the Gospel narratives render the character of Jesus, especially in relation to the question of how he embodies his own teaching, and how he thus becomes an example to the readers and hearers of the text. In this way, the Gospel narratives are read as vehicles of 'character ethics', comparable to the sort of ethics taught in the philosophical schools. Johnson calls this approach 'the narrative Jesus as moral exemplar'. The third approach, 'the narrative Jesus as revealing God', concentrates less on Jesus' humanity (as in the first two approaches) and more on that aspect of his character that transcends ordinary humanity—his 'divinity' or divine characteristics, according to the Gospel narratives. This approach takes seriously the larger 'mythic' story of Jesus, whether explicit or implicit in the texts, and reads it in the context of contemporary philosophy. In the fourth approach, which is labelled 'Jesus and narrative ontology', the focus is aimed at the nature of the Gospel narrative itself as narrative, and the 'ontological implications of reading', where 'ontological' refers to the way in which the narrative composition and performance brings into existence something that 'previously did not exist', and 'the peculiar sort of presence it thereby establishes in the world' (Johnson

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, 'The Jesus of the Gospels and Philosophy', in *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays* (ed. P. K. Moser; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63–83.

admits that he is 'only at an early stage of thinking about this perspective').¹⁰

Johnson's suggestions are very helpful in providing an overview of some of the ways in which the topic in question can be approached. Given my methodological preference to focus on the 'narrative Jesus' rather than on the 'historical Jesus', the present approach broadly corresponds to Johnson's second approach. Moreover, ancient Greek philosophy was commonly divided into ethics, physics, and logic, where 'physics' referred to the study of the nature of the world and included subjects like theology, cosmology, and cosmogony. In simplified terms, if the first two of Johnson's approaches are taken together, one could say that they correspond roughly to the field of ethics, while the third approach, involving the 'mythic' dimension, finds correspondence in physics (Johnson's fourth approach need not concern us here). The aim of the present study is to deal primarily with the first field of philosophical inquiry, viz. ethics. But it should be noted that the division between ethics and physics is not always that clear-cut in Graeco-Roman philosophy. In Stoicism, for instance, physics, including theology and cosmology, was typically considered the very foundation of ethics, and the latter was in a constant dialogue with the former. This means that the ethical aspect tends to hold hands with the (meta)physical aspect. My intention is to concentrate primarily on the former, although the latter may occasionally come into view.

The aim, then, is not to engage in the search for the 'historical Jesus', although the study may certainly have some implications for that enterprise. Rather, it is the Jesus of the Gospels who is under discussion, and particularly the question of how the Gospel authors portray the person of Jesus in comparison to portrayals of leading or ideal figures in the philosophical schools, whether historical (e.g. Socrates or Diogenes) or not (e.g. the ideal Stoic sage). Stoic philosophy appears to be of particular importance here, as '[t]he Stoic doctrine of the wise man was famous—indeed notorious—throughout the Hellenistic period'.¹¹ In fact, in a recent article Stanley K. Stowers suggests that Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is a figure largely shaped by the Stoic

¹⁰ Johnson, 'Jesus of the Gospels', 79–80.

¹¹ George B. Kerferd, 'The Sage in Hellenistic Philosophical Literature (399 B.C.E.–199 C.E.)', in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 320.

idea of the sage.¹² According to Stowers, Matthew drew upon Stoic ethics because he ‘inherited’ a Jesus who was known as a teacher but did not have any clear and elaborated ethical teachings that would make him similar to—or rather, superior to—other prominent teachers of Graeco-Roman culture. Stowers’s arguments and conclusions are of great interest to the present study, and his approach is a good example, albeit still quite a rare one, of the scholarship needed to fruitfully bring (back) together the theological and the philosophical in New Testament exegesis. Earlier research has certainly paid some attention, for instance, to the parallels between the figure of Socrates and the figure of Jesus,¹³ but not from the perspective of bringing in philosophy in this way, namely, as an inherent part of the process by which the writings of the New Testament were formed.

Questions that will be raised in this study include the following: How does the author in question speak of Jesus in relation to contemporary philosophy? Do we see Jesus take on a certain ‘philosophical’ role in the Gospels, through either his statements and reasoning or his way of life? In other words, do we see him ‘philosophize’ in a way similar to the philosophers? Were the Gospel authors inspired by descriptions of ideal philosophers in their own descriptions of Jesus? In what way is Jesus’ conduct analogous to that of leading philosophical figures in Graeco-Roman antiquity, according to these texts? Conversely, in what way does his conduct differ from theirs? In general, what is the significance of Graeco-Roman philosophy for the early Christian understanding, narrative, and image of Jesus? While a number of Graeco-Roman sources are presented and discussed in the study, the emphasis is on the interpretation of the Gospel texts and their portrayals of the figure of Jesus.

It can and should be expected that different writings give rise to different answers to these and other related questions. Careful attention must therefore be paid to the peculiar features and setting of each writing, including close awareness of the writing’s historical context—if we can say anything reasonable about that—as well as

¹² Stanley K. Stowers, ‘Jesus the Teacher and Stoic Ethics in the Gospel of Matthew’, in *Stoicism in Early Christianity* (ed. T. Rasimus, T. Engberg-Pedersen, and I. Dunderberg; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 59–75.

¹³ Ernst Benz, ‘Christus und Sokrates in der alten Kirche’, *ZNW* 43 (1950–1): 195–224; Klaus Döring, *Exemplum Socratis: Studien zur Sokratesnachwirkung in der kynisch-stoischen Popularphilosophie der frühen Kaiserzeit und im frühen Christentum* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979).

its argumentative structure, ethical teaching, and theology, especially in relation to the figure of Jesus. In this study I have chosen to confine my treatment of ancient portrayals of Jesus to the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament, Mark, Matthew, and Luke (including some portions of Acts). The reason for not including the Gospel of John is this: I think I will surprise no one by claiming that, of all the canonical Gospels, the relationship between Jesus and ancient philosophy is most lucid in the Gospel of John, which in turn explains why there has indeed been some research on that Gospel in this respect, not least in relation to its prologue.¹⁴ I, on the other hand, wish to deal with early Christian narratives of Jesus whose philosophical context is less apparent and has not received scholarly attention of any similar scope. What has been undertaken in this respect for the Gospel of John has been left undone for the Synoptic Gospels.

As the discussion above indicates, the present study is inspired by narrative criticism of the Gospels. The study does certainly not claim to be a 'narrative-critical' study. It merely seeks aid from this approach when appropriate for present purposes, including the analysis of the characterization of Jesus and the emphasis on reading each Gospel separately, in its own right. It should also be clear that I will not address the so-called 'Synoptic problem'¹⁵ in this study, but whenever it comes to the question of the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels I will join most scholars in assuming Matthew's and

¹⁴ See, e.g. the references in Harold W. Attridge, 'An "Emotional" Jesus and Stoic Tradition', in *Stoicism in Early Christianity* (ed. T. Rasmussen, T. Engberg-Pedersen, and I. Dunderberg; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 77; George van Kooten, 'The "True Light Which Enlightens Everyone" (John 1:9): John, Genesis, the Platonic Notion of the "True, Noetic Light," and the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's Republic', in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-interpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics* (ed. G. van Kooten; Themes in Biblical Narrative 8; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 149–94. For more recent literature, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); George van Kooten, 'The Last Days of Socrates and Christ: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Phaedo Read in Counterpoint with John's Gospel', in *Religio-Philosophical Discourses in the Mediterranean World: From Plato, through Jesus, to Late Antiquity* (ed. A. Klostergaard Petersen and G. van Kooten; Ancient Philosophy & Religion 1; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 219–43.

¹⁵ On the 'Synoptic problem', see, in particular, the thorough studies of Delbert Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004); Delbert Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources*, Volume 2: *The Unity and Plurality of Q* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). A fine, briefer overview can be found in Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (The Biblical Seminar 80; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Luke's dependency on Mark. Other source-critical questions, such as that of the existence of 'Q', do not have direct bearing on the study: the main attention is paid to the narrative form of each Gospel in its own right; that is to say, the nature of each author's portrayal of the character of Jesus, most often irrespective of the source-critical context, although, when appropriate, the relationship between Matthew and Luke, on the one hand, and their source, Mark, on the other, are touched on occasionally. Given the nature of the Synoptic Gospels as 'synoptic' ('seen together'), some repetition is necessary. As a rule, I do not discuss the relationship between the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus and the possible words and actions of the historical Jesus. Inspired by the narrative approach, I treat the Gospels first and foremost as literary works. Also, the choice of topics discussed is based on my assessment of relevant passages in the three Gospels.

The choice of Graeco-Roman sources is important as well. Since we are dealing with the characterization of a certain person in the (late) first century CE, it seems most appropriate to consult Graeco-Roman sources from roughly the same period in order to see how the philosophical sage was perceived and characterized in that period. This includes in particular the sources of late Stoicism—in this case, Stoics in the first and early second century CE (often referred to as Roman Stoicism). But other (roughly) contemporary Graeco-Roman sources are consulted as well.

It should be noted at the outset that this study does not argue that the Gospel authors necessarily knew the writings and/or teaching lessons of the Graeco-Roman philosophers under discussion. The possibility that this was the case is not excluded, but it is not argued for or presumed. Rather, it is presumed that the Gospel authors were in one way or another familiar with Graeco-Roman traditions, literary or oral, in which they engaged on their own premises. Needless to say, the Gospels and their authors were firmly rooted in Jewish teaching, belief, and way of life. But they were also part of their Graeco-Roman context, whether lingual, literary, ideological, or social. To begin with, the authors all wrote in Greek, the international language of the time, not in Aramaic. Obviously, their audience, whether Jews or Gentiles, also spoke or knew Greek and were probably located in the diaspora, i.e. in a Graeco-Roman environment, perhaps Rome or Antioch.¹⁶

¹⁶ See the discussions in Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 96–102; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*

Teresa Morgan has recently pointed out that, although there were certainly differences between philosophical doctrines and popular ethics,¹⁷ the relationship between the two seems to have been closer than scholars have often assumed:

It is clear that some 'literary' works, though written by members of the social and cultural elite, had a mass audience from at least the sixth century BCE well into late antiquity. Foremost among them is Homer, followed by new comic playwrights, especially Menander, Plautus and Terence, farces and mimes. Oratory of all kinds was delivered to mass audiences in lawcourts, public assemblies and town councils. During the principate, epideictic oratory, delivered on behalf of a town in honour of visiting dignitaries, to honour local benefactors and politicians, or to mark a special occasion of almost any kind, by rhetors who were often paid by cities of emperors themselves to practise and teach their skill, was a prime form of public entertainment. In a least some places and times, it was common for the works of historians to be publicly read and honoured in their native or adopted towns. Even philosophers could become local celebrities.¹⁸

This applied to figures like Diogenes the Cynic and Socrates: '[I]t seems likely that high philosophy and the culture in which it lived shared many of their hero-figures and ethical concerns, and that characters like the Seven Sages, Socrates or Diogenes did not have to move from one part of the culture to another, because they were always common to all.'¹⁹ Moreover,

Most important of all, the worlds of popular ethics and high philosophy were not segregated, any more than the worlds of proverbs or fables and high literature were. The best we can do to characterize the relationship is probably to say that in high philosophy and popular ethics we find two streams of culture, ultimately rising from many of the same sources, which sometimes mingle, each influencing the other, and sometimes run separately, along roughly parallel terrain. Even when they do not mingle, they are closer in some ways than we might expect, a vivid reminder that our scholarly distinction between popular and high

(trans. J. E. Crouch; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (trans. C. M. Thomas; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 8–10.

¹⁷ Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 333–40.

¹⁸ Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 4.

¹⁹ Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 283.

culture is probably often too sharp, and that the landscape of ethics in the Roman Empire is ultimately one landscape.²⁰

Having noted this, it is important to stress that the present study is not so much concerned with the question if the *audience* of the Gospel authors were in some ways familiar with philosophical teachings and ideas. Rather, it is the *Gospel authors themselves* that are primarily under consideration in this regard, that is to say, the question whether they were familiar with and made use of philosophical ideas to portray the person of Jesus. It seems very unlikely that they would have been unacquainted with some of the philosophical traditions of their closest environment. Luke, for one, was at least familiar with the Stoics and Epicureans (Acts 17.18), some of whom seem to have converted to Christianity (v. 34), and he knew of Seneca's younger brother, Gallio (18.12–16). It seems fair to assume that Luke also knew some of the philosophers' teachings and traditions. Given their close correspondence—literarily, ideologically, and historically—it also seems fair to assume that the authors of Mark and Matthew enjoyed a similar, if not as outspoken, frame of reference, including some traditions about the philosophical sage.

MORAL CHARACTER, CLASSICAL VIRTUE THEORY, AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A study of how each Gospel author portrays the character of Jesus clearly benefits from the approach of narrative analysis, which focuses on the literary character of Jesus. But there is another form of character in the context of which each literary character of Jesus is analysed, namely, character as a cross-literary and cross-cultural idea: the ideal moral person. The present discussion focuses on the ideal person or character as developed and accounted for in ancient philosophical theory and literature. This falls under the category of ethics, which, as I noted above, is the philosophical field with which we are primarily concerned. In this regard I also referred above, more specifically, to 'character ethics' relating to one of Luke Timothy Johnson's methodological suggestions of approaching the subject of

²⁰ Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 299.

'Jesus and philosophy', using Johnson's own terminology in that respect. However, in order to avoid confusion, it should be noted here that I will not make further use of this terminology, due to its rather unclear frame of reference in the scholarly discussion. To be sure, the term 'character ethics' has been in some use in recent biblical scholarship, especially within the Society of Biblical Literature group of 'Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation', as well as in the group's published products,²¹ where the term appears to be applied as some kind of alternative to the more widely used philosophical concept of 'virtue ethics', with a distinct religious-communal flavour. But while it is evidently used as a term for ethics that in one way or another focuses on the role of character, there is a remarkable lack of clear definition of what is meant by the term in these publications, and its precise relation to virtue ethics is not explained (although it should be).²² For this reason, I do not use the term 'character ethics' in the following discussion.

It is rather the field of virtue ethics that provides the proper ethical framework for the present study; that is, insofar as 'virtue ethics' refers to ancient virtue theory and not its modern counterpart,²³ the latter of which certainly involves a return to ancient Greek ethics but naturally expands it in accordance with modern knowledge and needs, and is in constant dialogue with other modern ethical theories. Generally speaking, this was in fact the only kind of ethics in Graeco-Roman antiquity. As Julia Annas explains, 'In the tradition of Western

²¹ William P. Brown (ed.), *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (eds), *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Robert L. Brawley (ed.), *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

²² None of the introductions to the works cited in the previous note includes any clear definition or explanation of the term 'character ethics'. Unless I am mistaken, the only attempt to define the concept at the beginning of each work is found in the foreword of *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, written not by the editors themselves but by Walter Brueggemann, whose definition is actually quite ambiguous, leaving unclear the 'character' part of the concept: "'Character ethics' refers to a way of thinking about and interpreting the moral life in terms of a particular vision of and a passion for life that is rooted in the nurture, formation, and socialization of a particular self-conscious community' (p. vii).

²³ On the modern version of virtue ethics, see Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).