

# Marcin Kowalski

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Armand Puig i Tàrrach, *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey*. Studies on the Historical Jesus (WUNT II/288; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Pp. xii + 310. € 74,00. ISBN 978-3-16-150504-1

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The book *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey* by Armand Puig i Tàrrach (APT) is a collection of nine studies on the historical Jesus written and published by the author over the past ten years. The author is a catholic priest, Dean and Professor of New Testament at the Faculty of Theology of Catalonia, Barcelona. The present book, which is an English translation of articles in French and Spanish, seeks to present an overall picture of Jesus of Nazareth destined for a popular readership. In the preface (pp. vii-viii), the author stresses both the fascinating character and the challenges of this task requiring careful rigor and academic exchange, drawing on earlier research and formulating afresh the old basic questions in the context of the so-called Third Quest for the Historical Jesus.

The book contains Introduction and eight chapters followed by the indexes of biblical references and ancient sources. At the end of each chapter one can find the conclusions which in a marvelously concise way sum up the main points made by the author. It is a pity that APT did not include the bibliography on the subject or at least a list of the publications quoted in the present book. Judging by the footnotes, the bibliographical references are rather modest, limited to the classic works on the subject, yet their advantage consists in covering multilingual literature in English, German, French and Spanish. Clearly, the purpose of the work is not to discuss with every single reconstruction of the historical Jesus, but rather to illumine some interesting and still debated points of Jesus's biography.

In the Introduction entitled "The Jesus Tradition", APT presents the hot topic of the historical Jesus research, namely, the issue of the oral tradition. The orality as a channel of transmission of the Jesus tradition is linked to the phenomenon of remembrance and memory of the disciples and is enrooted in the impact of their Master's words, deeds, and particular style of preaching. The author indicates three main groups responsible for gathering and

preserving the oral traditions on Jesus: the Twelve, the five Galilean women, and the family of Jesus. Drawing some conclusions on the pre-Easter shape of the tradition on Jesus, APT states that it was mostly oral, derived from the direct testimony of those who accompanied Jesus (eyewitnesses), and it was not anonymous. In the final part of the Introduction the author exposes the elements of the oral tradition and divides them respectively into the one with a high and with a fair degree of certainty. In the first category APT puts the purpose of the oral tradition which is the remembering and repeating the teachings of master, faithfulness and active reception of the received material, and non-substantial modifications. The author's understanding of the oral transmission situates it somewhere between strict memorization and simple reminiscence. APT also rightly pays attention to differences in shaping the oral material according to its type: narrative or sayings.

Coming to the elements of the oral tradition with a fair degree of certainty, the author envisages the transmission of the Jesus tradition as a combination of the two categories: individual "witness" and "communities". APT does not follow the model of "the formally controlled tradition" (Gerhardsson, Byrskog, Bauckham) and modifies the views of the proponents of the so-called "informal, but controlled transmission" (Dunn). The author claims that the control over tradition exercised by Jerusalem mother church was limited to confirming and ratifying the missionary activity. The control from the part of those who initiated the tradition was rather informal and it was supplied with the control of veracity from the point of view of the recipients. The tradition to be accepted as faithful and credible had to be acknowledged as such by the receivers.

In the Chapter 1 ("The Search for the Historical Jesus") APT deals with the issue of method of the search for the historical Jesus. The major topics included here are the sources and the criteria of historicity. The author's approach to the sources is rather traditional and similar to the one presented by J.P. Meier in his book *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. In the present publication APT limits himself to the canonical texts of the NT and to Josephus, only occasionally making a reference to the Gospel of Thomas. Discussing the criteria of historicity, APT calls for revision of the criterion of discontinuity and coherence, and proposes their reformulation after Theissen who coined the criterion of plausibility (*Plausibilitätskriterium*). The criterion, according to APT, may be stated thus: "anything in the sources that serves to explain the impact of Jesus on early Christianity and which, at the same time, can only exist in a Jewish context, is to be considered as historical" (p. 50). The purpose of the new methodology lies in finding a way to combine the four classic criteria of historicity (discontinuity, coherence,

Armand Puig i Tàrrach, *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey*

multiple attestation, embarrassment) and to come to a more holistic approach to the research on the historical Jesus. In the last paragraph dedicated to the connection between history and faith, APT opts for bridging the gulf between history and faith. The reasoned research, according to the author, is capable of rediscovering the approach to Jesus experienced by the early Church.

In the subsequent chapters, which are an English translation of previously published articles, APT focuses on the still debated issues in the biography of Jesus. In the Chapter 2 (“The Birth of Jesus”), the author analyzes the Infancy Gospels notoriously regarded by the scholars as wanting from the point of view of historical information and deserving little historical credibility. After having exposed the divergences between Matthew and Luke, the author stresses the similar synopsis of the events recorded in the two Gospels with the main point: the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea. The most valuable part of the study carried out in the Chapter 2 consists, however, in explaining the puzzling issue of gaps concerning the events related in Luke 2:1-7. First of all, the problems are caused by the fact that the mention of census ordered by Augustus during the reign of Herod and affecting all the inhabitants of the Empire (2:1) has no Roman historiographical evidence. Secondly, in a Roman census inhabitants were registered in the place where they lived and where they had property. Third, the information about Quirinius census in 6 CE corresponds to that of a typical Roman census where the main reason was to assess the property of each person and apply a corresponding tax. The events in Lk 2:1-7 and the picture of Joseph not finding a place even in caravanserais, seem not to square easily with the Roman census. The solution to this puzzle sought by the author meticulously scrutinizing both Jewish and Roman historical sources is as follows: Luke connects the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to a universal census issued by Augustus (8 BCE) which coincides with the census ordered by Herod (7/6 BCE). The census by Herod was executed *more judaico* and did not require the tax declaration or valuation of property, but only payment of the annual and individual *tributum capitis*. One could be registered either in the place of one’s residence or of the ancestry. Luke, a good historian, provides another information on the famous census carried by Quirinius in 6 CE which altogether is to stress the universal historical context in which the birth of Jesus takes place.

In the Chapter 3 (“The Family of Jesus ‘according to the Flesh’”), APT portrays the family of Jesus. Starting with Jesus’s parents, his difficult childhood (abnormal character and gossips surrounding his origin) and Davidic lineage, the author then comes to the issue of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. The family of Jesus is responsible for preserving the memory on Him

and, as in case of James, plays an important role in the Jerusalem Church. As for the expression “the brothers of Jesus”, APT speaks in favor of the so-called Epiphanius solution presented in the extrabiblical sources from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century on. Epiphanius interprets the siblings of Jesus as his legal but not biological family, the children of Joseph’s first marriage.

The subsequent Chapter 4 (“Why Was Jesus Baptized by John?”) illumines the much debated scene of the baptism of Jesus taken by many scholars as a proof of Jesus’s dependence on the Baptist. According to APT, the event is truly a turning point in Jesus’s life. Baptism of John was the sign Jesus was waiting for, the sign of the eschatological forgiveness and mercy which will become manifest in Son’s ministry. At the heart of this almost private event accompanied by an entirely personal vision stands the relationship of Jesus with the Father which will be a lifeblood of his mission.

Chapter 5 (“Jesus and the Commandment Not to Steal”) focuses on Jesus’s position with regard to wealth. Jesus proposes generosity and detachment from the possessions as a way to heal the hostility felt against those who take away our property. His assessment of riches as barriers to entry into the kingdom is to motivate the disciples to focus on the treasure of the kingdom. That, in turn, allows one to be generous and neutralizes the temptation to steal.

Chapter 6 (“Violence and Jesus of Nazareth”) explicates Jesus’s opposition to the use of violence. Jesus’s ministry is a practical demonstration of God’s strength which however does not turn into violence. The author stresses the fact that Jesus rejects violence as a behavior toward foreigners (Samaritans, Luke 9:51-56) and toward the Roman conquerors. Instead of the Messiah-king and military liberation, Jesus brings the people the sign of fellowship and solidarity embodied in the miracle of the bread multiplied for the thousands. The kingdom of God will not arrive by feeding hatred against the Romans, but by holding a friendly and plentiful meal (J 6:4). In the same vein, the discussion about the sword at the last supper (Luke 22:35-38) is interpreted by ATP as Jesus’s forceful “no” to violence. Jesus’s call to sell the coat and buy a sword is interpreted by the author not in the literal, but in the figurative sense. It is a warning to be prepared to endure persecution and suffering, and to give up one’s life for the Master. Not even the scene of cleansing the Temple, analyzed in detail by APT, can be read as a sign of violence. Rather it should be regarded as a messianic sign pointing to the fact that the essential institution of the Jewish religion lost its importance in the presence of Jesus, the new and definitive manifestation of God in human’s history. Summing up, in Jesus’s teaching violence, revenge and hatred do not correspond to God’s original plan. The renunciation of violence is a necessary step to preach and embrace the Gospel of forgiveness.

To renounce revenge is the way to avoid the spiral of violence. In the same way, to love one's enemy is the mean of overcoming the hatred at the place where it arises, in the heart.

Chapter 7 ("Jesus: Prophecy and Wisdom") is to show, according to the intention of the author, the reciprocal links between "prophecy" and "wisdom" in the teaching and activity of Jesus. Jesus is the prophet of the incoming Kingdom of God, but not a prophet of God's judgment. The rule of God which, according to Jesus, had arrived, creates problem for apocalyptic, dualistic vision which separates the present world from the future one. APT claims that the picture of apocalyptic Jesus dominated by the imminent arrival of the end has no support in the synoptic material.

The author further tries to substantiate his claim by pointing out that Jesus's language is permeated with the notion of discovery and decision taking. Since the kingdom is already present, the primary question is how to enter it. In the same time, however, APT acknowledges that the preaching of Jesus should be set in direct relation with the judgment and salvation of the end-times. Finally, we have got a set of texts like Mt 8:11-12.21-24; 14:41-42; 23:37-39 which seem to present Jesus as the apocalyptic preacher. The author explains that these hard passages sounded ultimately as the word of encouragement in the ears of the disciples of Jesus. Besides, the above-mentioned statements were clearly exaggerated and destined to cause the conversion of listeners. Ultimately, the judgment presented by Jesus with the images from the Book of Daniel was to stress he urgency of situation in which the decision must be taken. All in all, APT argues, the apocalyptic conception for the Rabbi of Nazareth was the starting point, not the end point (p. 244). The author in his portrayal of Jesus seeks to keep an equal balance of a wise man and a prophet. The center of the picture of Jesus is the revelation of God of compassion and care, the Father, and the Creator, whose love is discernible in the powerful works of Jesus. The ethics of Jesus are also the ethics of love and are founded on the return to the original plan of God.

The last Chapter 8 ("Was Jesus a Mystic") is a presentation of the religious personality of Jesus. The author starts with the humanity of Jesus: his emotional life, firmness of the decisions he took, and the sense of reality he showed in his teaching and actions. APT underlines three particular occasions of testing in Jesus's life. The first one is the temptation in wilderness after which Jesus started out on his public ministry. The second one is the so-called "Galilean crisis", when, after the great sign of the feeding of the multitude, Jesus refuses to yield to the acclamation of the people and withdraws to the mountain (J 6:14-15). At that point many left him. The third time came during the last days of Jesus's life, when he was aware that his

death was close. In all these trials Jesus did not lose his identity or spiritual equilibrium, nor was his relationship with God shaken. In every moment of his life Jesus was a man of God and a man of prayer.

Jesus's experience also differed from the human mysticism in the fact that he did not demand God's forgiveness, but offered it. He never repented of his actions and never committed a sin. His speaking and acting surpassed ordinary prophetic elocutions, because he spoke from God and identified the reception given to himself with the one given to God. The activity of Jesus was full of authority which derived from his special relationship with the Father. All in all, Jesus was not a mystic in the ordinary sense of this word. Though he experienced testing and trial, his unique relationship with God was not filtered through sin and guilt. In the last part of the Chapter 8, APT ponders on the three visions and the role they played in Jesus's life: the vision of the heavens opening at the baptism in the Jordan river (Mk 1:10), the vision of the fall of Satan (Luke 10:18), and the transfiguration on the mountain (Matt 17:1-8). All of them were crucial for Jesus's mission and corroborated the three major decisions he took during his life. The heavens open confirmed Jesus's identity as the Son and motivated him to initiate his own proclamation of the kingdom. The vision of the fall of Satan showed the Father's approval for the life choice made by Jesus and for his ministry consisting not in baptizing but in healing and exorcizing. Finally, the third vision ensured Jesus that his decision to go up to Jerusalem and die a violent death was a part of God's plan. Although Jesus was not a mystic in the ordinary sense of the word, in him, concludes APT, "what every mystic yearns for was made a reality" (p. 285).

How to evaluate the book *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey* by Armand Puig i Tàrrach? It is a publication which preserves both the rigor of scientific research, and, in the same time, it is not overloaded with exegetical technicalities. The author kept his initial promise to offer a book destined also for popular readers interested in the historical Jesus. Both the scholars and popular readers will find interesting the concise presentation of the role played by the oral tradition in the transmission of the memory on Jesus. The Chapter 1 dealing with the Birth of Jesus may be regarded as an exemplary demonstration of how a careful study of extrabiblical sources contributes to defending the historicity of the Gospels. Besides, the theological insights given by the author in the exposition of the scene of baptism or when presenting Jesus, the mystic, are truly inspirational and bring new understanding of the turning points in Jesus's life.

Among the eventual faults of this excellent book one can enumerate the lack of the final bibliography and too modest footnotes. The exposition of

Armand Puig i Tàrrach, *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey*

the methodological issues in the Chapter 2 also seems to be too brief and fragmentary. The presentation of Theissen's *Plausibilitätskriterium*, because of its concise character and conceptual shifts, will be confusing for the reader who is not familiar with it. When discussing the connection between history and faith the author also omits some important names, like e.g. J.D.G. Dunn or N.T. Wright. Further, a more thorough presentation of the apocalyptic Jesus could be demanded from the author, especially because of the importance of this image in the scholarly world. APT claims that the picture of apocalyptic Jesus dominated by the imminent arrival of the end has no support in the synoptic material. This verdict, interesting as may it be, has no further substantiation. It is not enough, as the author does, to give a modest note on Mt 10:23 arguing that it may have an ironic meaning or that it is an addition by the early community (p. 224, n. 16). Finally, in the Chapter 7 the author presents Jesus, the sage with no reference to the ancient material on the rabbis and Greek wisdom teachers, or without even mentioning the wide popularity of this topic among the contemporary scholars.

Despite these lacks, the book *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey* is truly worth reading. Paraphrasing its title, it is really an interesting and challenging journey into the realm of the historical Jesus. It will be an inspiring lecture both for the popular readers and for the scholars searching for new insights and a fresh look at the person of Jesus.