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# Nietzsche's "Historical" Jesus: The Crucified Free-Spirit and Bringer of Glad Tidings

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## ABSTRACT

Elements of Theology and New Testament scholarship are interwoven into this essay to supplement the reading of Nietzsche's "historical" Jesus as it appears in *The Anti-Christ.* The paper unfolds in four sections: First, thoughts are offered regarding Nietzsche's methodological approach to his reading, and Nietzsche interprets Jesus as representing a unique and "paradigmatic individual." Second, a detailed examination of Jesus' ministry and relationship to God and the Holy Kingdom reveals unique elements of Nietzsche's reading: Jesus as "symbolist," "free spirit," and bringer of "glad tidings" (one who dwells in God's love and presence). Nietzsche's reading is unique in that he interprets the living Kingdom of God in terms of a "present" manifestation and reality, offering a decidedly "anti-apocalyptic" view of Jesus, who is concerned with opening and inviting others into a reality devoid of the ontological distance separating God and humanity. Third, the essay offers thoughts on why the early Christians and later the established Church "mythologized" Jesus, for when they failed to plumb the depths of his esoteric symbolism, misinterpreted his mission and vocation, they created the fictitious apocalyptic messiah the world now knows, one who supposedly died for the sins of the world. Final thoughts are then offered regarding the impact of Nietzsche's reading. Jesus is not understood by Nietzsche in terms that are adversarial; instead, he holds Jesus in high regard because of the responsibility demonstrated for his appointed task and spiritual vocation, which ultimately led to his fateful death on the cross.

***Keywords:*** Nietzsche; The Anti-Christ; Historical Jesus; Good News; New Testament; Theology

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# 1. Nietzsche: The Interpretive Approach to Jesus

*The Anti-Christ* (1888/1990) is Nietzsche's final and perhaps most powerful and sustained psychological attack against institutionalized Christianity, an assault on what Nietzsche dubbed a decadent form of life-negating beliefs, the ultimate and most pernicious exercise in *décadence* and *ressentiment* that robs the superior individual of his strength and creativity. The values that Christianity embraces and thrusts upon its devotees, through the strict mediation of the cunningly sinister activities of the *priestly caste,* stand antithetic to the values Nietzsche embraces, which include the project of the *revaluation of all values,* linked to the efficacious discharge of the will to power. What is good and what counts as a pathway to happiness is for Nietzsche, "All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power," and the ascending life is grounded in the supreme "feeling that power *increases*—that a resistance is overcome," expressive of the instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation and increase, supplementing and heightening the overflowing forces expressed and discharged as *power* [1]. Conversely, all that is of no value emerges and proceeds from weakness, which hinders the ascending life and the efficacious discharge of the will to power. This understanding, as related to Christianity, is expressive of extreme *décadence* and the acceptance of *décadent values,* and these life-negating values are *nihilistic* in nature, and they perniciously hold sway under the name of Christianity.

Exploring Nietzsche's view of the troubled and pathological psychology of Christianity, this essay develops a portrait of Nietzsche's worthy adversary, Jesus, the Nazarene, the *redeemer,* the *Crucified,* the *Bringer of Glad Tidings.* Readers are familiar with Nietzsche's other infamous opponents, the luminous literary and philosophical antagonists such as Schopenhauer, Wagner, Strauss, and of course, the Athenian "gadfly" Socrates. Nietzsche adopts a philosophical exegetical approach, which is hermeneutic in nature, when analyzing the historical (*pre-Easter*) Jesus in *The Anti-Christ.* This type of methodological approach, according to Jaspers, demonstrates that it is "impossible to base a portrait of Jesus on compelling historical proof," however, through careful interpretive efforts it is possible to render Jesus "discernable through the veil of tradition" by gathering "data that are reliable, probable, or merely possible, and shape them into a picture" [2]. In the quest to establish a psychological portrait of Jesus, Nietzsche categorizes the Nazarene in terms of a unique and "paradigmatic individual," or what Crossley terms, the "Great Man" classification, which in New Testament studies emphasizes "the importance of great individuals in bringing about historical change…of a given culture or nation" [3]. Typical of this interpretive strategy, Jesus is portrayed as a teacher (rabbi), prophet, or ethical and enlightened philosopher of alternative wisdom. For Nietzsche, however, because Jesus demonstrates the incessant drive to challenge and overturn traditional religious dogma and moral ideals, he displays the rebellious soul of a *free spirit*. Nietzsche avoids any serious talk of Jesus' role as divine savior, and so Gospel accounts of miracles and healings are absent, and as Hull observes, in relation to Jaspers' comments, Nietzsche's approach to Jesus assumes that "we cannot know *with certainty* which actions and sayings can be attributed to him" [4].

Strauss's early study—*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835/2010)—offers a detailed interpretation of Jesus that precedes Nietzsche and wrestles with similar elements of "historical" interpretation, such as the crucial distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter "risen messiah" or *The Christ.* However, despite Nietzsche's youthful admiration for the "incomparable Strauss," as Higgins contends, Nietzsche, in the first of four *Unfashionable Meditations* ("David Strauss: The Confessor and Writer"), charged Strauss, based on his later work, *On the Old and New Faith* (1873/1997), with leaving "the door open towards a faith in Christ as a mystic figure worthy of public veneration and honor," this because Strauss embraced the idea of a *noble* form of morality that transcends systematized Christianity to take root and blossom [5]. However, in *The Anti-Christ,* Nietzsche aims at Joseph Ernest Renan's interpretation of the historical Jesus—*The Life of Jesus* (1863/2015)—stating emphatically that Renan's study is indelible "proof of an execrable psychological frivolity" [1]. Renan identifies Jesus as both a *genius* and a *hero,* two character traits that Nietzsche claims are foreign to Jesus' character and psychology. Hull argues that Renan's study avoids all traces

of historicity and focuses instead on Jesus' divinity, "and its narration freely makes use of imaginative details that would not bear historical scrutiny" [4]. In relation to Strauss and Renan, Hull stresses that although Nietzsche "accepts the secular philological strategies used by [these] earlier thinkers…[Nietzsche] is sharply critical of the values that they use to construct a moral narrative of Jesus," for these interpretations are guided by liberal values [4]. Nietzsche's critical confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with historical figures transpires, as Higgins argues, in terms of an "*enemy-relation,*" but unlike Schopenhauer, Wagner, Strauss, and Socrates, Nietzsche's relationship with Jesus is irreducible to an antagonistic *enemy-relation*. Although not explicit to Higgins' reading, what is intimated regarding some of Nietzsche's polemical targets might be applied to the historical Jesus: "The presence of an *agon*, even a tense one, does not for Nietzsche necessarily preclude the opponent from being a friend," or at least, as argued throughout, from garnering Nietzsche's respect [5].

Similarly, Altizer views Nietzsche's portrayal of Jesus in a positive light, concluding, "The truth is that Nietzsche revered Jesus as he did no other historical figure," and in great part this is because Nietzsche viewed Jesus as "the very opposite of Christianity" [6]. Benson agrees that what Nietzsche wrote about Jesus was, for the most part, positive, in that Nietzsche was "more anti-Christ than anti-Jesus," and goes on to add, "it is not too much to say that Jesus is one of [Nietzsche's] heroes" [7]. However, it is Jaspers' account that is closest to the view expressed within this essay, whereas opposed to an overtly reverential portrayal, Nietzsche found in Jesus something noble, a dedicated, unflappable responsibility to "the actualization of a way of life," an authentic commitment to a form of life (*praxis*) embracing the *unconditional imperative* of Love (*agapē*), an existence "in which everything is genuine and without pretense or falsehood" [8]. Indicating that it was doctrinal Christianity that ignored the supposed *real* Jesus and, instead, motivated by *ressentiment* and the drive toward *instrumentality*, created and then embraced a distorted and inauthentic vision of Jesus. Ironically, as addressed in the third section of the paper, according to Nietzsche's critical *historical* and *psychological* account, Jesus was ultimately sacrificed at the altar of Christianity, which is to say, the developing and established Christian Church.

## 2. Jesus: The Crucified Free-Spirit and Bringer of Glad-Tidings

Nietzsche declares that the "word 'Christianity' is already a misunderstanding—in reality there has been only one Christian, and he died on the Cross" [1]. However, classifying Jesus as the "first Christian" is misleading and not entirely consistent with the bulk of Nietzsche's interpretation, for Jesus might best be described as a *proto-Christian.* Hence Nietzsche seeks to elucidate the *pre-Easter* Jesus and his spiritual project of reconceptualizing traditional Judaism. Nietzsche, focusing on the psychology of Jesus, distances him from the depraved psychology undergirding organized Christianity and its ecclesiastical representatives. However, despite describing Jesus as a *décadent,* Nietzsche acknowledges that Jesus remained uncorrupted by the *ressentiment* driving institutionalized Christianity. For Nietzsche, Jesus is unique; he is neither vindictive nor vengeful: "He is not angry with anyone, does not distain anyone" [1]. Recall Nietzsche's critique of Renan's historical Jesus as a *genius* and a *hero.* To be a hero, according to Nietzsche, requires a robust and highly attuned capacity for *violent resistance,* and in addition, there must be the instinctive and well-sharpened drive to inflict *harm to one's enemies*, a trait that Nietzsche finds in the ancient Greeks, especially the Homeric Greeks. Nietzsche identifies in Jesus the very opposite characteristics comprising the hero, for he does not "censure, does not defend himself…does not bring 'the sword'," and it is Jesus's "incapacity for resistance" that is expressive of his unique moral or ethical sense, "'resist not evil!": blessedness in peace, in gentleness, in the *inability* for enmity" [1].

Considering Renan's comment on the "genius" of Jesus, Nietzsche sarcastically supplants the designation *genius* with that of "idiot," but it is more appropriate to speak of Jesus' *childlike naivety,* in terms of *natality* or the *openness* to what is dawning, of what is new, of what is still *on the approach* [9,10]. For the attuned world within which Jesus dwells is given structure and meaning through God's loving and Holy *presence*/*presencing*, for Nietzsche proclaims that the Kingdom of God *is within Jesus,* but it is also available to others. However, this inner world or eternal world is inaccessible to and wholly unfit for higher types or the true heroes Nietzsche envisions. The nature

of Nietzsche's conclusions here is expressive of several themes for further elucidation and discussion: First, there is a critique of Jesus' world as being unfit for the Übermensch, but it is also noted that Jesus' world, a realm of *spiritual dwelling,* is far too radical to be conditioned or understood by the organized Church. Second, the idea of Jesus' unconditional commitment to God is emphasized, which finds reality and expression in Jesus' embrace and pedagogic understanding of the spiritual power of religious *symbolism* throughout his ministry, as he seeks to bring God's mysterious and esoteric truth to light and invite others into the immediacy of the reality of God's Kingdom.

Readers should not allow Nietzsche's dramatic and explosive language to distract from what is suggested about Jesus's character, for as stated above, Jesus never rises to the status of *hero.* Jesus is not a rebel striking out against the established socio-political order; he is not explicitly and with conscious intention railing against the overarching Imperial Roman political structure. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's Jesus is indeed *rebellious* in the sense that he challenges (*trans-values*) the codified moral system of first-century Judaism, thus highlighting the crucial difference between Jesus as a "political reformer" and "religious-moral reformer." Jesus is far too drawn to unconditional love (*agapē*) and gentleness for such a radical characterization of the social outlaw or activist reformer. When Nietzsche writes about the "holy anarchist who roused up the lowly, the outcasts, and 'sinners'…within Judaism to oppose the ruling order," he indicates that Jesus was identified as and then branded, a "political criminal," an erroneous view solidified by the criminal adjudication of Imperial Rome as mediated by the high Jewish council of the Sanhedrin. Nietzsche stresses that it was post-crucifixion that this erroneous characterization of Jesus as a radical social reformer was established, for even in the events that led to his crucifixion, "this warlike trait, this negative trait in word and deed, was *lacking* in his image; more, he was the contradiction of it" [1]. Readers unfamiliar with trends in New Testament studies will note that the portrait of Jesus as a rebellious social activist, which Nietzsche denies, is found in the scholarship of Crossan, who offers a portrait of Jesus as a courageous, rebellious Jewish Mediterranean peasant challenging established social views related to class, gender, and status [11].

Nietzsche highlights the ineffable sense of *mystery* surrounding Jesus' relationship to the Holy in a way that harkens to the German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who, in claiming that the Godhead's mystery is impenetrable, reveals the paradoxical nature of communion with God in *Holy truth* [12]. This focus on the indelible mystery enveloping the Holy reveals the difficulty in attempting to categorize Jesus, and Nietzsche is adamant that any attempts to definitively explicate Jesus' life and message will most likely lead to a misunderstanding grounded in the misinterpretation "of an *original* symbolism" [1]. This is because Nietzsche describes Jesus as a "symbolist *par excellence,*" for the "whole of reality…language itself, possesses for him merely the value of a [symbol], a metaphor" [1]. It is Jesus' use of symbols, through his sophisticated pedagogic implementation of parables, that uniquely situates Jesus "outside all religion, all conceptions of divine worship, all history…all experiences of the world, all acquirements, all politics, all psychology, all books, all art" [1]. Crucially, Nietzsche's focus on Jesus as a symbol is intimately connected to a unique sense of mystical spirituality, which is inseparable from the experience of the Holy, establishing an intimate connection to the living *way-of-being* that is unique to Jesus' teaching and an attuned *mode of dwelling* in God's *presence.* Nietzsche's analysis of symbolism is related to and prefigures Tillich's view of "radical theology," for Tillich like Nietzsche, recognizes that *the language of symbols is the language of the spiritual attunement of faith,* and vice versa [13]. Tillich stresses that symbols, unlike signs, are capable of capturing and expressing the mysterious connection humans have with the divine, which, in an obscure or oblique manner, symbols facilitate. However, since symbols are never wholly self-generated, they cannot be explicitly deciphered or fully experienced, for they are limited in their ability to gather and communicate meaning, which is why Nietzsche insists that Jesus defies the type of codification required within systematic religion and worship. The encounter with religious symbols always results in an *excess of meaning,* the depths of which can never be fully plumbed. Indeed, this issue of semiotic interpretation served as a stumbling-block for Jesus' disciples, for Nietzsche claims that they were forced to "translate a being immersed entirely in symbols and incomprehensibilities into their own crudity in order to understand anything of it

at all" [1].

Nietzsche indicates that it is through the pedagogical use of symbolic language that Jesus facilitates participation in the Godhead, which Tillich terms *ultimate reality,* and in terms that harken to *mysticism,* relating to *gnōsis* or esoteric enlightenment, symbols (e.g., Rock, Cross, Light) are not Holy in themselves, but "they point beyond themselves to the source [*archē*] of all Holiness, that which is [Jesus'] ultimate concern." However, beyond merely pointing to another reality, symbols facilitate participation *in that reality* by breaking open "levels of [spiritual] reality which are otherwise closed…[unlocking] dimensions and elements of [the] soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of [that] reality" [13]. The soul's enlightened transformation (*metanoia/theophany*) is made possible through the active participation in the reality symbols mediate. Bérard claims that this *theophanic* process occurs because symbols, "*Ontologically* connect something visible to something invisible, and in these figures, it is possible to grasp the realities without figure," and this occurs through the interplay or counter-striving movement between *similarity* and *dissimilarity* [14]. Notably, it is the case that parables (*parabolais*) are typically classified as *arguments from analogy,* couched in *symbolic* language, and they invite listeners as participants into a pedagogical context where this counter-striving activity occurs. Bérard explains that *similarity* represents the static, *analogic* element of symbols and *dissimilarity* expresses the dynamic, *anagogic* feature, and interplay between the two "leads to the renouncing of the image and, dynamically, raises the image towards its model [*archē*]" [15], and this *anagogic* function unfolds through the ecstatic process of elevating the soul, which is to say, the experience of symbolic meaning facilitates the intellectual-spiritual communion with the symbol's Holy and divine origin or source.

Hull is correct that Jesus did not seek to establish a revised nomological version of indelible objectivist religious morality (*deontology*), however, it is possible to argue that Jesus was not only involved in *thinking-and-practicing* a form of ethics, but beyond this, he was boldly enacting a critical *de-construction* in terms consistent with a rebellious *trans-valuator* of the traditional Jewish morality of his day. For example, Hubben contends that the morality of traditional Judaism, a tradition within which Jesus was immersed and embedded, sought to "reduce everyone to its level, while occupying the superiority of a "judgement seat" [16]. But Hubben stresses in his reading of Nietzsche that Jesus, "was not a judge…Jesus opposed those who judged others and wanted to *destroy the morality* existing in his age…Nietzsche calls him an anarchist who had to die for this sin, not the sins of others" [16]. This is yet another instance of Jesus demonstrating characteristics consistent with a *rebellious* nature, where the distilled essence or soul of a *free spirit* is on display: "One could," as Nietzsche observes, "with some freedom of expression, call Jesus a 'free spirit'," for he opposes traditional and established "law, faith, dogma," and "cares nothing for what is fixed," such as *God's Word* and *Will* codified in human terms [1]. Benson states that a crucial aspect of Jesus' message is contained in the idea that "any attempt to specify the law in a 'once and for all' sense is doomed to failure" [7], and here, importantly, since Jesus is concerned with challenging all that is unjustly *fixed* and *codified,* the door opens for a critique, reinterpretation, and potential alteration of traditional morality—the *transvaluation of traditional Judeo values*—for Jesus revolts "against the Jewish Church…against the good and the just" [1]. Despite disagreeing on what represents a moral person, Nietzsche agrees with Jesus that morality "is an idol that we have created," and Jesus is highly critical of the pharisees and scribes for inventing "laws to advance their own interests," and Jesus struggles against the reduction of morality to mere *economic* or *instrumental* ends [7]. Jesus' practice of ethics includes both a radical focus on Love (*agapē*) and the critique of *ethical codification*: To embrace Love as the ground of ethical action rescues morality from the disingenuous strictures of *instrumentality;* to act out of the Love for others indicates that "a genuine [internalized] concern for their welfare motivates action" [7]. As Benson contends, "Love is not just a value one happens to have chosen, but a 'something' (certainly not a 'thing') that goes beyond all values, value systems, dogmas, and everything else," and such a radical view instantiates "*truly disruptive behavior,*" the *rebellious* behavior of an evangelical immoralist [7].

However, this is not to claim that Jesus abolishes or obliterates traditional notions of *sin-and-forgiveness,* such a statement is far too extreme, for instead Jesus reinterprets and "*recasts* the notions of sin and forgiveness"

as related to individuals and unique contexts of interaction, "in ways that are [often] paradoxical," as expressed through the symbolic power of *parables,* but, as Benson is careful to point out, "this recasting is to correct deficient formulations of the conceptions, not the concepts [or virtues] themselves" [7]. Jesus' reconceptualization of ethics is always understood within the enlightened *living context*, providing structure and direction to actions in terms of the Greek "*sumpatheo,*" indicating the sharing of fellow feelings, and beyond, the sharing of a mode of *dwelling* or *being-together* in a community of faith and Love. Thus, as opposed to adopting a view to *ethikē* proper, in terms relating to the type of *formal moralist* (*phrōnēmos*) encountered in Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*), it is more accurate to state that in Nietzsche's unique interpretation Jesus experiences and lives a mode of earthly dwelling in the loving and transformative presence of God, relatable to a far more *originary* form of *ethics* bound up with attuned dwelling and communal *praxis,* realized through what the ancient Greeks understood as ēthos, which is irreducible to and more primordial than *ethikē* or *ethos*.

Nietzsche's understanding of Jesus' message of *Glad Tidings* introduces a unique and somewhat controversial notion related to, as introduced above, Radical Theology, namely, the view of Jesus as an "anti-apocalyptic" religious figure, in direct opposition to common eschatological readings of, for example, Mark's Gospel [17]. This unique *anti-apocalyptic* view is indicative of an intimate relationship with God, one where the Kingdom is not found in a promised future; it is not on the approach, rather it is *immediately present,* experienced within. For as Nietzsche writes, Jesus' life was a life "lived in love, in love without deduction or exclusion, *without distance*" [1]. Again, to this point, Nietzsche stresses, "The 'Kingdom of God' is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come 'in a thousand years'—it is an experience within the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere…it is a condition of the heart - not something that comes 'upon the earth' or 'after death'" [1]. These revelatory observations highlight the crucial difference between the *immanent* Kingdom of God and the *transcendent* Kingdom of God *to come*. Caputo, in his writings on Radical Theology, interprets this notion. already found in Nietzsche, as grounded in the immediate *presencing of Spirit,* which actually "reveals the *unity* of immanence and transcendence…the world and God…the underlying spirit *of* the world" [18,19]. Thus, in short, Nietzsche boldly challenges the traditional religious concept of the transcendental, supra-sensuous, and eschatological appearance of the Kingdom, a view that contradicts what Crossan critically describes as a fictitious Kingdom that is wholly "dependent on the overpowering action of God moving to restore justice and peace to an earth ravished by injustice" [11]. In line with Nietzsche's exegesis, it is noted for readers that Sheehan is one of the first contemporary New Testament scholars to philosophize the *immediacy* of the Kingdom of God as related to Jesus's ministry, convincingly arguing for the idea of a "present-future" Kingdom of God, which is not to be interpreted as "God's return to the world after a long absence," but instead, as directly related to the encounter with Jesus' *symbolic* pedagogy, centered in the "believer's reawakening to the fact that God had always and only been *there*" [20].

Attending to Nietzsche's reference to the *obliteration of distance* between God and Humanity, Altizer observes that in Jesus' ministry, no distance or *ontological gap* exists separating God and humanity; the relationship to God is not about belief or faith requiring a radical *leap* and is instead about a radically reconceived and enlightened *praxis* paving the way, leading to God. Bérard provides crucial insight into *how* this notion of the immediate *presence* of God's Kingdom is facilitated by means of participation in the enlightened "truth" made available through the symbols Jesus incorporates into his teaching: God's supreme and unconditional Love (*agape*) inspires enlightenment (*gnōsis*), which moves the will to action in an ecstatic state that transcends "subjectivism," beyond mere egoistic inner feelings, initiating and establishing communion between the "objective" truth of the Godhead as it is expressed *subjectively* in the soul (*psychē*) and spirit (*pneuma*), and this represents the obliteration of the *ontological distance* between God and humanity of which Nietzsche speaks. It is through the embrace and use of symbols that opens the potential for this relationship to God to be experienced as a spiritual transformation. Thus, a portrait of Jesus can be drawn from Nietzsche's reading wherein an intimate relationship to God is expressed in terms of the inseparability—the obliteration of the distance between

the *ontic-and-ontological,* the *terrestrial-and-celestial,* the *chthonic-ouranic-and-chronologic-kairotic,* and here too Meister Eckhart's presence resonates in these thoughts regarding Jesus' immediate relationship to God, which defies any notions of division or distance: "The more God is in all things, the more He is outside them. The more He is within, the more without" [12].

Nietzsche insists that Jesus did not "come to 'redeem mankind' but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind is his practice" [1]. Further, "It is *not* 'penance', *not* 'prayer for forgiveness', which leads to God: *evangelical practice* [ēthos] *alone* leads to God, it *is God!*" [1]. Within Jesus' ministry, his *practice,* there is no longer any need for repentance through punishment sanctioned by the Church, by means of the mediating clergy. Salvation is not granted through either the Jewish or Christian notion of the "penance-and-reconciliation doctrine," instead, Jesus believes that is "through the *practice* of one's life that one feels 'divine', 'blessed', 'evangelic', at all times a 'child of God'," demonstrating the "profound instinct for how one would have to *live* in order to feel oneself in 'Heaven', to feel oneself eternal" [1]. The kingdom is embraced as a powerful, *living inner reality* that inspires Jesus' behavior and *practice.* This enlightened way of life, Jesus' "*evangelical way of life* is a transformed way of living, *not* a new belief…*Not a* belief but a going, above all a *not*-doing of many things, a different *Being*" [1], and this spiritually attuned *way-of-Being* is the ultimate demonstration of "how one ought to live…he entreats, he suffers, he loves *with* those, *in* those who [are even] doing evil to him" [1]. Jesus experiences and lives the holy communion with God, and the "*consequence* of such a conception projects itself into a new *practice*, the true evangelic practice" [1]. In relation to this idea, which, in addition to representing a unique religious practice, is also an inspired mode of *ethical dwelling.* Heidegger offers insight that suggests Jesus' practice of living in the light and Love of God's *Grace* relates to the archaic Greek notion of "ēthos," which Heidegger claims references the open and Holy region of Being [21]. Heidegger does not understand ēthos in terms of "ethics" (*ethikē*), instead claiming that ēthos refers to the more original sense of an abode or intimate space of dwelling with others, and beyond this, he identifies ēthos as the primordial site of the Holy, that which "pertains to the essence of the human being," as that which "resides in the nearness to him" [22]. When attuned to the Holy, all human dwelling instantiates the vocation and task of respectfully preserving, in terms of a stewardship or guardianship, "the advent of what belongs to the human being in his essence," that is, the arrival (advent) and manifestation of the Holy or Godhead [23].

The issue of naivety was introduced when discussing Renan's interpretation of Jesus, and a certain "childlike" quality was related to the sense of being receptive and open to the *practice* of *living-the-Kingdom* in the present-now (*nun*). The notion of "child of God" in Nietzsche's reading indicates that transformation to the soul does not come through ritual, prayer, or sanctioned forgiveness but is instead *granted* and arrives because of Jesus' childlike receptivity for a renewed experience of dwelling with God. What is required is Jesus' openness to a sense of wonder and mystery that defies reduction to the views and dogmatic rituals of the Church. Glad tidings, according to Nietzsche also indicates, "The kingdom of Heaven belongs to *children,*" and those that have the ability and disposition (*natality*) to remain open and resolute (*Gelassenheit*) for the advent of God's loving and *immediate presence*, "the faith which here finds utterance is not a faith which is born by struggle—it is there from the beginning, as if it were a return to childishness [*natality*] in the spiritual domain" [1]. In terms reminiscent of Meister Eckhart, Heidegger brings attention to this phenomenon related to the *presencing* or unfolding of Being, recognizing the attunement of *Gelassenheit* (releasement), which calls for the "openness to the mystery" of Being. In addition, this experience as described is not unique to Jesus; it is available to all who are open and resolute: "Everyone is a child of God—Jesus definitely claims nothing for himself alone—as a child of God, everyone is equal to everyone else" [1]. As stated, this attunement of resolute openness is termed *natality* by Arendt, which can be understood as an openness to the interpretive process of learning anew, of bringing a new version of the self—through Love and in communion with God—into existence. Nietzsche's insists that Jesus' relationship with and to God is neither grounded in faith nor belief, but instead in an entirely transformed *praxis* or *way-of-being* in communion with God, within a relationship that defies and transcends what was termed *ontological distance.* The

potential for transforming one's existence requires the potential to be or become *childlike,* embracing the potential for change and growth, displaying the ontological predisposition to make and remake one's life anew in relation to God.

## 3. Postmortem: Ressentiment and the Divination of Jesus, The Christ

Just as Nietzsche is often misinterpreted and misappropriated, especially in relation to political perspectives, [24] the early Christian communities, and later Paul and the Church, misinterpreted, for fearful and even nefarious reasons, the life and message of Jesus. According to Nietzsche, the Gospels offer irrefutable evidence "of the already irresistible corruption *within* the first community," and ultimately, what "Paul later carried to its conclusion with the cynical logic of a rabbi," started and facilitated the "process of decay which commenced with the death of the redeemer" [1]. As argued, for Nietzsche, this is a steady and "progressively cruder misunderstanding of [Jesus'] *original* symbolism," and with each "extension of Christianity over even broader, even cruder masses…it became necessary to *vulgarize,* to *barbarize* Christianity" [1]. In great part the creation and growth of the myth of the salvific redeemer and harbinger of end-times—*Jesus, The Christ*—is traceable to his unexpected and shameful death on the cross, and what arose was "the feeling of being shaken and disappointed to their depths, the suspicion that such a death might be the *refutation* of their cause," inspiring the fearful question of *why* this happened [1].

In the effort to seek and then rationalize for a cause, the first path taken was to question *who* put the redeemer to death. It was determined that the Jewish authorities were responsible. So as discussed earlier, a distorted vision of Jesus emerged that linked him with a radical and rebellious warrior seeking to strike out "*against* the social order," indicating that Jesus was conspiring to *seditiously* organize a *coup d'état,* initiating a "*mutiny against the social order*" [1]. The early Christians failed to grasp what was essential to Jesus' spirituality, his teachings and *practice,* which was instantiated and displayed in the "exemplary element in his manner of dying, the freedom from…every feeling of *ressentiment*" [1]. Based on this line of reasoning, the early followers of Jesus were unable to come to terms with and *forgive* his seemingly inexplicable death; it is at this point that the "most unevangelic of feelings, *revengefulness,* again came uppermost," and indeed, the "*crude miracle-worker and redeemer* fable comes at the commencement of Christianity" [1].

Jesus' original "good message" of love (*agapē*) was bastardized by the Christian movement, and ironically, against Jesus' purported message of love and salvation, the Gospel writers, serving themselves and the burgeoning Christian communities, advanced the "*dys*angelic" as opposed to the "*eu*angelic" portrayal of Jesus in the accounts of his birth, ministry, death by crucifixion, and ultimate resurrection. For Altizer, the Gospel's reversal of Jesus, offering a distorted portrait of how he had lived as interpreted by Nietzsche, represents a "nihilistic act, reversing the fullness of his life into a Heavenly nothingness, and reversing the ecstatic joy of his Gospel into an ultimate guilt and *ressentiment.*" As opposed to adopting Jesus' practice of welcoming all into the intimate and Holy circle of God's children, an egalitarian brethren gathered in God's Loving *presence*, "their revenge consisted in *exalting* Jesus in an extravagant fashion, in severing him from themselves" [1], by raising him on high, removing him from the realm of the terrestrial, elevating him to the status of the transcendent Messiah who would later return in victory on the clouds. This reversal of Jesus' message of *glad tidings* is taken to the extreme by Paul, in whom Nietzsche recognizes "the genius of hatred, the vision of hatred, or the inexorable logic of hatred" [1]. Paul radically shifts the "center of gravity" of Jesus' entire existence "*beyond* existence in the *lie* of the 'resurrected' Jesus" [1]. Paul feared that if Jesus's death could not be overcome, the entire evangelical movement was in danger of collapsing. Thus Jesus had to be *resurrected,* and when this view is combined with the rationalizations and mythmaking of the early Christian communities, an indecency of an interpretation insidiously develops *post-mortem,* post-Easter: "The doctrine of a Judgement and a Second Coming, the doctrine of his death as a sacrificial death, the doctrine of Resurrection with which the entire concept 'blessedness,' the whole and sole reality of the Evangel juggled away for the benefit of a state *after* death" [1].

## 4. Conclusion

Nietzsche's unique reading of Jesus offers a vista into the attuned dwelling, *practice,* and *symbolic* teachings of Jesus immersed in the reality of the "earthly" Kingdom of God, which was presently at hand, manifesting as a form of Holy attunement (*Grace*) expressed through love and acceptance, in terms of a spiritually transformed way of life. Nietzsche admired Jesus because he lived and died authentically, instantiating the love and compassion that he experienced, taught, and graciously offered to others. Nietzsche does not attack Jesus; instead, he directs his polemic vitriol against the early development of Christianity as well as its later manifestation as a world-dominating religion. Because the Church misunderstood the original symbolism of Jesus, they missed what made him a truly noble character, one who displayed, against all odds, "integrity and loftiness of soul" [1]. Nietzsche respected Jesus' acceptance of the daunting responsibility his actions entailed, for Jesus did not die to redeem the sins, actions, or guilt of others; he died because of his own actions and guilt, refusing to allow the cup to pass from his lips when accepting his ultimate and fateful death on the cross. Nietzsche is clear that Jesus, in service of and dedication to his spiritual project or vocation as discussed, "takes no steps to avert the worst that can happen to him—more, *he provokes it*…and he entreats it, he suffers, he loves *with those* who are doing evil to him" [1].

Admittedly, Nietzsche's vitriolic critique of Christianity, grounded in historical and psychological analysis, is considered controversial. However, in this author's opinion, only those embracing a *literalist* or *fundamental* approach to Jesus and the Gospels would take issue with his intriguing reading of Jesus. As demonstrated in this essay, Nietzsche's interpretation is prescient in that it resonates with and indeed prefigures the types of readings—kindred spirits to be sure that have been popularized by New Testament scholars associated with not only the Jesus Seminar but also the theological scholars associated with the development of Radical Theology. This observation flies in the face of Jaspers' contention that misinterprets and underestimates the power of alternative interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth, for the German philosopher claims that the type of philosophical exegesis that Nietzsche offers is uninteresting to "the doctors of faith, either among the rebels or the orthodox believers" [2]. Based on the ground traversed, it is possible to state that elements of Nietzsche's reading are consistent with Radical Theology, which is, according to Caputo, ultimately seeking and finding a third way through the tradition, which seeks to find a way between, on the one hand, "supernaturalizing [Jesus] like fourth century Greek councils and [that of] naturalizing [Jesus] like modern philosophers" [18]. Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche's reading stresses Jesus's connection to the spiritual dimension of life, which is often sacrificed with the so-called "death of God" and the birth of authentic nihilism. For Nietzsche, as is well-known, the response to this epoch defining moment draws inspiration from aesthetics and the attunement it inspires, but Nietzsche recognized and was always alert to the danger, with respect to spirituality, of throwing the baby out with the bathwater when rejecting and breaking free from the grip of religion, which would inevitably leave a spiritual vacuum in its wake. In Jesus, Nietzsche found a laudable instance and example of a unique, *free-spirited* nature and an authentic expression of spirituality, inspiring the consummate dedication to a difficult, if not tragic, way of life despite its suffering and cruel, fateful outcome.

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