**Christianity Got The Wrong Gospel**

And you thought the discovery of the ossuary of Jesus was a scandal (the burial site and bones of Jesus- see James Cameron documentary and related research). Well, this historical blunder and scandal outstrips that by magnitudes of order. Christianity adopted the wrong gospel right from the start. This is not just about some peripheral shift in perspective but about a complete denial and rejection of the very core message that the historical Jesus taught. Christianity rejected that gospel of Jesus for an entirely other gospel, and for a gospel that has arguably caused more damage over history than anything ever conceived by humanity (in that it is based on retaliation which has been horrifically destructive over human history).

The evidence has been in for a while now thanks to the excellent research by people like James Robinson in regard to the development of the Q Sayings Gospel (the discovery that Q was developed in stages- original and later redaction or revision). Now I came to my conclusion regarding the Christian rejection of Jesus’ true gospel from another angle (from considering the central teaching of Jesus in contrast to Paul’s central themes). My own perspective and comments in the posts and essays below are rooted in Bob Brinsmead’s excellent and long-standing challenge to payback atonement based on his own research (see his series The Scandal of Joshua Ben Adam for example). But Robinson has provided corroborating affirmation of my conclusions from his research into the history of Christianity’s origins and Jesus’ original sayings in sources such as Q. However, despite his good research I have a contention with Robinson and related researchers in that they do not make clear enough the profound ramifications of the Christian rejection of the original gospel of Jesus.

Q (Quelle) is believed to be the earliest collection of the sayings of Jesus and it presents clear evidence that Jesus advocated an original message, an original gospel of non-retaliatory response toward all people, but that this gospel was drastically changed by later generations of Christians who opted for an entirely opposite worldview. This change comes out in the later edition of Q known as Q2.

The main issue in this has to do with Jesus’ advocacy of non-retaliation or what we call unconditional love. He challenged the age-old view that God was engaged in retaliatory justice or payback justice. Jesus argued clearly and consistently for non-retaliation and stated that we should live this way because this was how God treated all people (Matt.5:38-48). God was actually about non-retaliatory treatment of all people. God did not retaliate, judge, exclude some, or punish. Jesus stated that this was the truly human way to respond to others, including enemies. So the issue was about our view of reality (was God about retaliation or non-retaliation) and therefore how we should respond to life or approach life. What was truly human response to be about? What behavior should shape a truly human existence? Was it to be about payback or authentic forgiveness and love? Unconditional or conditional? These issues are critical to human perception, human feeling, response, and social behavior (how we shape our existence and societies).

But immediately after he introduced his breakthrough insights on non-retaliation, Jesus’ earliest followers brought in another entirely opposing view that was oriented to apocalyptic thinking and they then interpreted Jesus’ message in terms of an apocalyptic perspective. Apocalyptic is all about retaliation, judgment, exclusion of the so-called bad or unrighteous, and punishment on a grand or ultimate scale. Paul’s gospel, which is Christianity, is also shaped completely by apocalyptic thinking (see James Tabor’s Paul and Jesus). It is all about retaliation, the supreme condition of offering an ultimate blood sacrifice to appease an angry God, and ultimate judgment. This is entirely opposite to what Jesus said originally in his central message of non-retaliation.

So you have two entirely opposite views or gospels. One presenting the message of non-retaliation and the other presenting the message of retaliation. And since the origin of this contradiction, Christians have endlessly tried to merge and mix these two opposing themes but they are irreconcilable. The endeavor to interpret Jesus in terms of retaliation has only resulted in a contradiction that distorts and undermines his core gospel message. Jesus could not advocate non-retaliation and at the same time advocate apocalyptic which is about ultimate retaliation. They are mutually excluding themes. Hence, Jesus was not an apocalyptic prophet.

Robinson in his comments on Q research also points to something that affirms that the insight of Jesus (that God did not advocate a retaliatory justice approach) was not just some peripheral element in Jesus’ message but it was the very center of his gospel. Robinson says that it was Jesus’ most important contribution to the history of human ideas. It is the one thing that overturns all past perception of justice as retaliation. So this is about the very heart of the gospel of Jesus. But Christianity has rejected this outright and opted for the opposite message- that God advocates retaliatory justice.

The issue at stake- Christianity has the wrong gospel. It took up Paul’s gospel of divine retaliation and rejected Jesus’ gospel of divine non-retaliation. The implications for human behavior and society are profound.

Wendell Krossa

**Note**: below are some email posts to a discussion group that deal with this great contradiction between the message of the historical Jesus and the Christian message. Further below the posts are a series of brief essays that were also originally email posts but have been gussied up a bit more as short essays covering this argument- that Christianity has the wrong gospel- in more detail.

**Email post, Aug.2/2013**

(This post was a response to a question on where James Robinson dealt with the shift from Jesus’ original sayings in Q1 to the later revision of his original sayings in Q2)

The interesting section in Robinson on God as non-retaliatory is in his book Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness. Especially pages 10-18. This gets into his comment on the various layers in Q, the more original and the later redaction that departed from Jesus’ insight on God as non-retaliatory. I have summarized this to give some flavor of the context of Robinson’s comments which are pointing to something very similar to what we have been going on about.

Robinson notes that Q consists of sayings drawn together by an editor, and then a later redactor with a particular point of view (a deuteronomistic view of history) which he imposed on the text, a view of a judgmental and punishing God. Robinson says this later redactional layer of Q is quite judgmental and glosses over a central dimension in the original Q collections that deal with Jesus’ view one on how one should think of God and how one should act accordingly. This correlation between Jesus theology and his ethic is clear, “there is an explicit correlation between Jesus’ teaching about God and Jesus’ ethic”. “Be full of pity as your Father is full of pity” (this is an original or archaic saying in Q1). Jesus appeals to God’s pity as the model to be followed. Forgive just as God forgives. These original collections are ignored by the later redactor, where God’s judgment has replaced God taking pity on sinners.

Robinson notes that the saying “love your enemy” is the highest that one can ever expect from a person, it is something that elevates a person above the generally human and makes them like God himself.

So, according to Robinson, there is a substantive tension between the two main layers of Q (the original clusters and the final redaction)- a tension both theological and ethical.

Hence, Robinson says, “Jesus’ vision of a caring Father who is infinitely forgiving and hence shockingly even-handed in dealing with the bad as well as the good, may have been lost from sight a generation later. Again, he notes the later Q redaction where God is then viewed as judgmental, wrathful, and wreaking vengeance.

The original Q people had tried to imitate a God that they understood in a quite different way, as giving sun and rain to the bad as well as the good. In that sense they had tried to be God-like. This view of God had dramatically transcended the “common sense justice of reward and retaliation that had pervaded antiquity”. He adds quoting someone else, “the proclamation of Jesus and the early Christian theology connecting to it has eliminated that concept of retaliation as the basis for or ingredient in an ethical order”.

He then says that the Q redaction had changed to envision the Q people as God-like but quite differently, like a judgmental God. “Jesus basic insight into the ever-loving and forgiving nature of God would seem to have been lost from sight as the age-old view of God undergirding retaliatory justice again reasserted itself...(this view of God as unconditional love was) the most important theological contribution by Jesus to the history of ideas”. And he notes that it was a non-theologian who noted “this basic shift in the doctrine of God at the basis of ethical conduct”.

**Aug. 2.2013 email post**

Just to clarify, the Q Sayings Gospel, as with the Gospel of Thomas, are the earliest versions or collections of Jesus’ teaching or sayings. They are basically just collections of sayings that the better known gospels of the New Testament (i.e. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John) drew from and added to.

In other places Robinson notes how Paul departed from Jesus’ teaching that sacrifice was not necessary to effect forgiveness. Paul claimed sacrifice (atonement) was needed, in direct contradiction to Jesus. This is similar to the shift by the redactor from a non-retaliatory God, back to a God of judgment and vengeance.

**Email post Aug.3/2013**

OK, just some further comment on what is going on with Q. The point to get in all this is the early Christian rejection of non-retaliation and the retreat to atonement mythology. The retreat to appeasing an angry God with blood and all the related mythology and ethical outcome of that mythology.

What is at stake in all this is monumental. It is about unconditional love versus retaliation. It is about those core themes and here we get to the very root of the things that influence human consciousness (subconscious) and human outlook and human feeling and behavior (ethics). It is about whether life gets better or worse.

One is about a breakthrough to an entirely new perception of reality and the ability to liberate human consciousness and take life in a new more humane direction. The other is about retreat to barbarism of the past, the darkness and fear of retaliatory reality and life, with its numerous related themes such as oppositional dualism.

To put it another way- at the root here is basic theology- is God love or not? This profoundly impacts ethics, how people respond and live. It does impact whether society become more authentically humane or not.

And our own work on grand narratives can help place this research in larger context and note the many relationships, linkages, and outcomes. Just as we have noted the outcomes from such things as the apocalyptic of Rachel Carson, and the wider green religion with its anti-development alarmism, and so on.

**Email post Aug.1/2013**

(This post relates the comment of Robinson that theology is the basis of ethics)

On the endeavor of people to replicate the divine in their lives and societies- Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist of long ago wrote a paper on Bali Indonesia where he noted that the Balinese tried to replicate their beliefs in the divine order in their society, down to the very design of their houses. Similar to the Israel endeavor to replicate the divine pattern in their temple and laws. This is an ancient human tendency- what we believe God is, so we will mimic in our lives. If our gods are nasty, so we will be. If our gods are nice, so we will be. I think Jesus understood this basic relationship between views of God and human behavior or ethics. Hence his summarizing comment in Matt.5:38-48 that this non-retaliatory response toward all was exactly what God was like.

**Email post Aug.1/2013**

(This was a response to another reader not in the discussion group)- You appear to have missed my main point. It is clear beyond question, and even most Christians admit this, that Jesus’ core theme was non-retaliation, or unconditional love. I have sent you some of the best research from Q, the earliest collection of Jesus’ teaching that the next generation of his followers rejected his early and clear message for their own contrary message of retaliation or payback thinking. This was the huge error of the early Christian movement and it has distorted entirely the gospel of Jesus. It is another gospel altogether. I would suggest that you note carefully this issue- the difference between non-retaliation and retaliation. It is the most fundamental issue in all this Paul versus Jesus research.

The reader above had also argued that we need to “stick to the Holy Bible in our discussion of the differences between Paul and Jesus and not go to sources such as Q”.

My response to him- But Q is your “holy Bible”. It is the very original gospel of Jesus. His original message collected by the earliest followers (later New Testament gospels drew on sources like Q for their content). All that followed departed from his original gospel of non-retaliation and took up the old retaliation justice theme that was in direct contradiction to what Jesus taught in his sayings and parables.

**Email post July 30/2013**

(Another response to the reader arguing there is no essential contradiction between Paul and Jesus). My response- You miss entirely the contradiction between Jesus’ view on this and Paul’s traditional payback thinking. Jesus very clearly taught no conditions but unconditional forgiveness (Matt.5, Luke 6, and so on). And Jesus very clearly said that this no demand, no payback, no punishment approach was exactly what God was like (the Matt.5:38-48 cluster of sayings- note the end of that- if you do this you will be like God who generously gives to all alike- no exclusion, no demands). All this argument for some payment first, gets God and Jesus all wrong. They are about authentic unconditional love. Unconditional forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness without demanding some payment first. As Bob Brinsmead has said, a God who does not forgive until the full debt is paid is a God that knows nothing about true forgiveness.

**Email post July30/2013**

(A response to a question on where Robinson comments on the shift away from Jesus’ original teaching to the later version of Q).

I ran across it in his book “Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness” and now again in his other book “The Gospel of Jesus”. It is scattered about in bits and pieces but he is quite clear on this “greatest contribution to the history of human ideas” and that it has to do with Jesus’ insight that God was not about retaliatory justice but this new unconditional reality (Robinson does not use this particular word unconditional but makes the same point with those statements in Matt.5).

He gets it that the retaliatory justice thing (God as undergirding retaliatory justice) was dominant through antiquity and resurfaced again in the Christian movement a generation after Jesus left the scene.

And then there are those helpful comments by him on the Sermon as a summary of Jesus’ core message (he comments on this in relation to Q and that Matthew makes his own version of the Sermon, adding some further material).

From there I take it to this “greatest contribution to human ideas” (the unconditional thing). So, taking all Robinson’s comments- that makes the cluster of Matt.5:38-48 the central core (greatest contribution) of the larger core message of Jesus which is the whole Sermon.

And we have arrived at this same conclusion in our own way. But good to see some of these notable scholars also getting it though somewhat scattered and not really coherent and thoroughly presented.

And I was wondering if you could remember anywhere in any other Jesus Seminar material if anyone had made any comments on this, similar to Robinson. I may have to go back over all those books- Crossan and Patterson and whoever, and take a look see. Nothing comes to mind anywhere but at the time I read them I was not too aware of this major Jesus/Christianity contradiction as they were on about many differing “dissimilarities”.

**Email post July 30/2013**

Let me finish something that I did not tie up properly before. I want to make more clear in the second paragraph below that when Christians try to hold those two things in tension they avoid an important conclusion of Historical Jesus, something quite critical to grasping this great Jesus/Christianity contradiction. What happens is that they acknowledge the unconditional material at the beginning of this particular cluster (5:38-48) but then they short-circuit his complete line of reasoning in that they ignore his end point in that little cluster of ideas. His end point is about theology- this new unconditional, not payback retaliation (eye for eye), is what God is about. Christians ignore this and instead skip over to Paul who offers an entirely opposite theology- God as retaliator-in-chief (Romans and other places- e.g. Thessalonians).

It should be emphasized how important all this is to understanding the roots of this Jesus/Christianity contradiction, the grandest contradiction in all history (grandest because it focuses the critically important retaliation/unconditional contrast). This overall Sermon (not just Matthew’s version but also in terms of the Q document and others) is the main summary of Jesus’ core message, as Robinson and others note. And in this Sermon, there is something even more important to focus in on- his core theme in his overall message and teaching is this shorter cluster about retaliation/unconditional.  I arrive at this conclusion from my own perspective (Bob’s work has been immensely valuable in this regard) but also by taking such things as Robinson’s comment that in the overall Sermon you get the core message of Jesus and then in particular in the Sermon you also get his “greatest contribution to the history of human ideas” which is his counter to ancient retaliation with unconditional.

So we need to hold Christianity’s feet to the fire on this. This end point of Jesus on theology (God as unconditional) also gets to the root of ethical behavior, which has always been rooted in mythology/theology. People, in their behavior and lives, mimic their gods. Even in secular movements.

Anyway, I will gussy this up more, try to make it more clear, and put it on my site when done, under the general category of essays on Unconditional.

**Email post July 29/2013**

One more on this...Robinson makes varied comments about this contradiction between Jesus (no retaliation, no sacrifice) and Paul (payback, sacrifice needed). Two radically different ways of viewing reality. The Jesus way and the Christian way- two radically different viewpoints.

Oh, I love the explosive nature of this type of insight. Christianity claims to be the religion of Jesus and yet it has absolutely contradicted his core message. Tried to bury it. Could not handle the truth (think Jack Nicholson in that military movie confronting Tom Cruise in the courtroom).

The greatest blunder in all history. A true pivot point. Christianity built on the worst error ever made and confounded it far more by making the worst blunder in all history, missing the corrective to that worst error and retreating to payback and creating a Christ myth with a dense mess of theology that affirmed as never before (intensified as never before) retaliation and payback as the meaning of reality and life. Has there ever been such a rejection of Jesus and the gospel of Jesus? No. Never.

Hope you and your friend Paul are comfortable now. <:

**Email post July 28/2013**

He mentioned the other day that he was bothered by this idea of unconditional as a pivot, an historical turning point. That piqued my thinking. Because I do see the historical pivot in Jesus and even Robinson was sort of getting at that- the old retaliation approach that governed all of antiquity and then this new unconditional insight from Jesus that overturned all that (even though it was lost a generation later as he noted).

But I would like to put this to you all about expressing this in as few words as possible and in some sort of style that is, for lack of a better word, “catchy”. What both you and J\_\_\_ have talked about, so that he who runs may see it.

The point to be made in regard to this unconditional pivot- something along the line that sorting out these retaliation/unconditional core themes is the most important thing anyone can do to properly understand the cosmos, why something (the NDE movement is consistently getting this- what all reality is about), what it means to be human, the highest human ideal (it fully defines love), human relating, and the basis of a truly human society or civilization. This gets to the very root of what is wrong in human subconscious and human society. It also redefines such core human concerns as justice. What justice should be about. And yes, even the OT prophets were getting into this.

So yes, this is about an historical turning point or pivot. And even for such things as cosmic theory. Eben Alexander was right that this is not only the most important emotional truth ever but also the most important scientific truth ever. It is not just about informing the spiritual but also informing the scientific understanding (and of course I would not argue for introducing this into science as science should be about discovery of a limited realm of reality). But I get Alexander’s point. Science claims to be on about finding all the truth about the cosmos and life. It can’t. That is for philosophy/theology and what not.

But I am still looking for a better and briefer way to state all this.

I want to suggest this as a comprehensive core argument or theory of all. But be clear that we are talking about spiritual or theological reality, and of course, that is what is at the root of many perceptions anyway- at core they are about mythology/theology. This is true even all through science also (many secular ideologies have these root perceptions that are essentially mythological/theological- Hawking bringing in his apocalyptic leanings to his cosmology, as does Martin Rees, and others, so also throughout the supposedly secular environmental movement).

So with unconditional we are gaining the core understanding of what life is about, and hence, what the cosmos is about. Any good NDE will show this comprehensive aspect.

Unconditional is very pivotal in the history of human understanding. It is the sole critical pivot, far more than what H\_\_\_ was getting at. Robinson did not get anywhere near this in his somewhat mild comments, though he showed that he understood that the thing that governed all antiquity, the old payback or retaliation view of God was changed radically in Jesus. He saw the pivot somewhat mildly.

Now to summarize this in a short paragraph that will get to people how profoundly important this unconditional thing really is.

Here below are 3 longer posts which have been gussied up a bit for public consumption. These offer more detail on the great Jesus/Paul contradiction and the fundamental error that Paul’s perspective is based on.

**Post 1**

The Jesus/Christianity Contradiction

Christian teachers make a hugely consequential mistake when they try to resolve the conflict between Jesus’ teaching on non-retaliation (unconditional love) and the larger Biblical context that promotes divine retaliation. Their argument is that Jesus clearly taught that we are not to retaliate and so retaliation should be left to God. God will repay or take vengeance. A more blunt way of stating this would be to say that we are held to the humane standard of unconditional treatment of all people but God is not.

This Christian explanation makes a stunning theological mistake because it does not include the final point of Jesus’ teaching on non-retaliation in Matt. 5:38-48 and that is his concluding statement that God does not retaliate. When Jesus said this, he fundamentally redefined the theological basis of authentic human behavior.

(Note: People have always tried to replicate their views of deity in their own lives and societies. As James Robinson says, the doctrine of God has long been the basis of ethical conduct).

At the conclusion of his teaching on non-retaliation Jesus made the most fundamental change to human understanding of deity that has ever been made (similar changes had previously been attempted by the Old Testament prophets- see note at end). He stated that we should not retaliate but, rather, express unconditional love toward everyone- friend and enemy- because God does not retaliate but shows unconditional love to everyone alike. Jesus extended his historically unique explanation on non-retaliation, or unconditional response and relating, to also define God in the same radical new manner, as non-retaliating or unconditional love. This is the single most important insight in all his teaching. Paul, and Christianity in general, missed this insight entirely.

Jesus (Matthew 5, along with Luke 6 and other places) presented the most thorough treatment of non-retaliation up till that time in history. He explicitly rejected retaliation as an appropriate human response and argued for non-retaliation or unconditional love as the highest human ideal. He stated that there should be no eye for eye response, we should turn the other cheek, and if someone sues us then we should give him more than what he sued for, we should go the extra mile, give to whoever asks and do not turn away (unconditional generosity), don’t just love our neighbor and hate our enemy (i.e. don’t engage eye for eye response, typical of pagans or pagan-like response) but instead love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us, forgive offenders seventy times seven (unlimited or unconditional forgiveness), and so on.

When Jesus rejected retaliatory responses for these new unconditional responses, he rejected past understanding of what was appropriate human action and he rejected previous understanding of justice as retaliation or payback. Whatever we feel about these “hard sayings”, Jesus made the point clearly that authentic human response or authentic love was non-retaliatory or unconditional.

But even more important in this material (and this gets us to the heart of the Christian error) Jesus also rejected the long-held belief that God promoted retaliation or punishment. He presented a radical new theology or new view of God, entirely different from all past understanding of deity. Note carefully what he actually said at the end of his series of statements on non-retaliation: If you do not retaliate, if you reject eye for eye justice, and instead love your enemy and treat everyone the same, both neighbor and enemy, and offer unlimited or unconditional forgiveness, well... and here it is... you will be just like the Father in heaven who gives the good things of life to all alike, both good and bad. This is exactly what God is like- non-retaliating, not meting out eye for eye justice (reward the good, punish the bad) but treating everyone with unconditional love, unlimited forgiveness, and inclusive generosity.

This is the stunning summary point in his teaching on non-retaliation or unconditional treatment of all people. He took his new insight on unconditional response and stated that this was exactly how God treated everyone. We should not retaliate but treat every person with unconditional love because God does exactly this. This point on God as non-retaliating is a vital part of the complete structure of his argument in this section on non-retaliation. You cannot ignore or dismiss the final conclusion to his argument because it presents the most radical challenge to theological perception ever made by any person.

So when Jesus applies non-retaliation to God, that is the summation point of this brief message of his, the high point, if you will, of his teaching on unconditional response and relating. Be non-retaliatory, he states, because this is exactly how God responds to everyone. By treating all people in a non-retaliating manner you will be just like God. We properly call this unconditional love. It is the correct way to understand God, said Jesus. All previous understanding of deity that was oriented to retaliatory justice and punishment (eye for eye) was wrong. How much more clearly could he have stated this? He offered a radical new view of God as authentic unconditional love.

But when Christians try to explain this unique new teaching of Jesus on unconditional love, they inexplicably truncate his full statement on this topic, as presented in Matt.5. They then try to balance his teaching on unconditional with the broader biblical teaching on retaliation and the requirement to meet atonement or payback conditions. They revert to the inhumane view of God as retaliatory and punishing just as Paul had done long before. And they then end up trying to hold two absolutely contradicting things in tension and to do so they must ignore the all important conclusion of Jesus that God is unconditional love. This gets to the very heart of what has become known as the great Jesus/Christianity contradiction, or the Jesus/Paul contradiction.

Despite insistent Christian claims that there are no significant difference between Paul and Jesus, the actual difference is fundamental and monumental. It involves profoundly opposing views of God- non-retaliating versus retaliating. The result is two entirely different gospels.

What appears to be happening in this contradiction is as follows: Christians cannot deny the clear teaching of Jesus on non-retaliation or unconditional response, such as at the beginning of his statements in Matt.5:38-48. And it is commendable that many do admit this element of unconditional as an authentically human insight- what some call “the diamonds in the dunghill”. But most Christian explanation then short-circuits Jesus’ complete line of reasoning by ignoring the final point in his teaching on non-retaliation or the unconditional treatment of people. As noted above, his final point in this non-retaliation section is about theology or God, and it is a radical new theology. This new unconditional insight- not engaging payback retaliation (eye for eye)- this, says Jesus, is how God actually treats all people.

But Christian explanation ignores this striking conclusion that God is also unconditional in his treatment of all people and, instead, skips over to Paul who offers an entirely contrary view of God. Paul retreated from Jesus’ teaching and back to the primitive view of God as retaliator-in-chief. He made this original mistake and it became central to Christian theology. Subsequent generations of Christians have continued to build their views of God on his error while ignoring the clear teaching of Jesus on God as non-retaliating. See Romans and other places, such as the letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul clearly states that God will retaliate (“I will repay”) and mete out punishment or payback vengeance (eye for eye). Paul’s God will not treat people unconditionally but instead demands that a great blood sacrifice be made first before he will forgive anyone. This is a theology of supreme condition, according to Payback Paul. It is a return to the same old retaliatory justice that dominated human thinking all through past history. It denies entirely the new insight of Jesus.

But you simply cannot affirm theological or divine non-retaliation in Jesus and then jump over to Paul to claim that God will retaliate. No. If you do that then you have outright denied the key statement in Jesus’ gospel where he said very clearly that God is not like that at all. God does not engage eye for eye or retaliation justice. God does not repay or execute vengeance. Paul got God all wrong, just as he got Jesus all wrong. He denied what Jesus clearly taught and thereby rejected the gospel of Jesus and created his own payback gospel (i.e. a great blood sacrifice had to be offered to pay for sin and appease an angry retaliating God). Paul thus created a major contradiction between his gospel and the gospel of Jesus and in doing that he created the fundamental error of the Christian religion.

Now who are you going to believe? Jesus or Paul?

So in trying to maintain two very different teachings in tension (non-retaliation and retaliation), Christians create a contradiction that not only distorts but completely cancels out any correct understanding of non-retaliation as taught by Jesus. The payback of Paul’s theology then undermined the fresh advance that was made by Jesus when he introduced his new core message of a non-retaliating God.

In the Christian endeavor to hold these two contradicting things in tension I understand the fact that many people, and especially good, moral and religious people, cannot let go of the impulse to make some sort of payment as it satisfies a personal felt need to make some form of atonement for sin (the felt need that retaliatory justice must be properly satisfied). After all, you cannot just forgive and forget without proper satisfaction of justice, Christians argue. But offering forgiveness without first demanding that offenders make proper amends is exactly what Jesus advocated so clearly in repeated sayings and parables (e.g. the prodigal son, give without expecting return, forgiving seventy times seven, love your enemies, etc.). Just forgiving and forgetting, without expecting payment or that conditions be met first, is exactly what Jesus taught.

But a religiously-trained mind that is strongly oriented to retaliatory justice has a hard time grasping the liberating and humanizing wonder of this unconditional message of Jesus.  Such a mind will fall back on such things as the belief that holiness in God must take precedence over love (see my essay From Retaliation to Unconditional Love for more detail on religious claim that holiness- separation, cleanliness, exclusion, offended purity- must be honored before love).

Further, there is the Christian belief that the entire Bible is the “word of God” and so all of its varied teachings must be respected and included somehow. And payback punishment is clearly advocated everywhere in Paul’s theology and elsewhere. Christians therefore feel obligated to come up with explanations that hold these two radically different things, profoundly contradicting things, in tension. And, after all, people claim that Paul does appear to provide a sense of complete satisfaction in regard to personal guilt over sinfulness and how to resolve that problem. But his retaliation theology is no real resolution. It does not ultimately alleviate deeply embedded human feelings of guilt and fear over looming punishment. Only unconditional love in divinity can do that properly and Jesus got this critical point right.

 Here are several quotes that are typical of the Christian endeavor to explain Jesus’ message on non-retaliation or unconditional love, while still maintaining Paul’s theology of divine retaliation or conditional payback. The outcome of this Christian endeavor is one of history’s grandest contradictions. First, the authors of the Bible.org site say, “Let me be clear that God wants us to take actions of personal revenge out of our hands. We can turn them over to the governmental authorities if appropriate, and even if that doesn’t work, we need to turn them over to God Himself. As Paul states in Romans: Repay no one evil for evil… Beloved do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord ([Romans 12:17, 19](javascript:%7b%7d)).  <https://bible.org/seriespage/jesus-and-law-retaliation-lex-talionis-matthew-538-42>

Another example of this contradictory tension is found at <http://www.biblicaltheology.com/rom/rom_12_13.html> where the authors state, “because love without hypocrisy loves as God loves: unconditionally...by so doing we leave the judgment and vengeance entirely up to the Lord”.

In these examples there is first the acknowledgement that there should be no retaliation, no repayment for wrong. We should practice unconditional treatment of people exactly as Jesus taught because that is authentic love. But then, on the other hand, there must also be some form of ultimate repayment for wrong, some conditional retaliation, according to Paul’s entirely contrary theology.

 James Robinson has also noted this Jesus/Christianity contradiction in his book The Gospel of Jesus. He points out from his study of the Sayings Gospel Q that what is called the Sermon on the Mount in places such as Matthew is really an enlarged version of a similar Sermon from the Q gospel. The Sermon is basically a collection of sayings that make up the core message of Jesus. Robinson says regarding the content of the Sermon, “(This) Sermon... is an early collection of Jesus’ sayings into what was no doubt considered to be the core of his message” (p.20).

But more importantly (from his other book “Jesus: according to the earliest witness”), Robinson affirms the significance of Jesus’ striking breakthrough insight that God was not involved with retaliation or payback punishment of anyone. According to Robinson, the particular statement that God does not engage retaliatory justice is Jesus’ greatest contribution to the history of human ideas. This means that the cluster of statements in Matt.5:38-48 on unconditional love is the core theme of Jesus’ overall message. It is the very heart of Jesus’ teaching that is contained in the larger Sermon. So his statements on non-retaliation or unconditional love of all people are the most important set of sayings in all his teaching, and especially important in these sayings was Jesus’ new insight that God was not a God of retaliatory justice but a God of unconditional love.

As Robinson tries to emphasize, we are talking about a breakthrough insight that is without equal in all history.

Robinson then notes that the followers of Jesus soon lost sight of his profound new teaching that God was indeed unconditional love.

“Jesus’ vision of a caring Father who is infinitely forgiving and hence shockingly even-handed in dealing with the bad as well as the good... (This was) the most important theological contribution by Jesus to the history of ideas... the proclamation of Jesus... eliminated the concept of retaliation as the basis for and ingredient in an ethical order.... (but) Jesus’ basic insight into the ever-loving and forgiving nature of God would seem to have been lost from sight as the age-old view of God undergirding retaliatory justice again reasserted itself...(Jesus’ new insight) may have been lost from sight a generation later...”  (“Jesus: according to the earliest witness”, p.17-18).

He adds from The Gospel of Jesus, “Jesus’ sunny experience of God showering love even on the bad and unjust gave way to the grim experience of a God of vengeance... God no longer shines his sun and rains his showers also on the bad and unjust but throws them out into outer darkness where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth...Jesus’ own commitment to loving even one’s enemies, as does the Father in heaven, was replaced by a God who has the temple destroyed as punishment...There is surely a certain irony in the fact that Jesus discovered God in the sunshine and flowers, but, as his disciples over the years became more learned in the scriptures, they lost sight of his revelation of God” (p.119, 120).

Robinson also refers to Paul’s retreat away from the gospel of Jesus and back into a retaliatory view of God. He says, “Jesus’ God apparently did not need blood sacrifice to make up for all the bad things the prodigal son had done, much to the dismay of the prodigal son’s self-righteous older brother” (p.87). However, Paul reverted back to the ancient and primitive belief that blood sacrifice (payment, punishment, retaliation) was necessary to effect forgiveness (p.87).

Paul rejected outright the core theme of the gospel of Jesus. He rejected Jesus’ new view of God as unconditional love and opted for the old view of God as retaliating and demanding blood payment for sin. This is one of history’s greatest blunders and Christians continue to maintain this horrific error even today by trying to hold in tension the clear unconditional teaching of Jesus, along with Paul’s teaching on condition and retaliation. The result is a horrific distortion of what Jesus had clearly taught- that God was unconditional love and did not advocate retaliatory or payback justice.

In conclusion, the unique breakthrough insight that Jesus made (his greatest contribution to the history of ideas) was about unconditional relating and existence, and he clearly stated that this was what God was actually like- God was indeed unconditional love. God treats every person- good and bad- with the same unconditional forgiveness, inclusion, and generosity, without demand for any prerequisite payment. This makes the Christian endeavor to hold Jesus’ teaching on unconditional, along with Paul’s theology of payback, irredeemably offensive and distorting. The Christian admixture of two entirely opposing theologies- retaliation and non-retaliation- results in a horrific distortion of history’s finest insight into authentic humanity and the true nature of God. It is a grand contradiction that is entirely irreconcilable. It is history’s most egregious rejection of the gospel of Jesus and it results in the greatest contradiction ever, the Jesus/Christianity or Jesus/Paul contradiction.

Wendell Krossa

For any interested, I have made similar arguments in a fuller account of this contradiction in my essay From Retaliation to Unconditional Love available at [www.wendellkrossa.com](http://www.wendellkrossa.com)

 Note: The OT prophets had attempted centuries before Jesus (800-600 BCE) to introduce a new view of God as non-retaliating, non-punishing. They had also advocated an entirely new view of justice, not as punishment but as mercy and liberation from payback conditions. They claimed that God did not want sacrifice but mercy (see Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:7-8, Amos 5:21-24). Jeremiah stated that God gave no commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices (&:21-22). Isaiah claimed that God took no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats (1:11). Bob Brinsmead concludes, “Paul’s message about the propitiation of God’s wrath by the blood sacrifice of Jesus as a payment for human sin is not the fulfillment of the message of the Old Testament prophets but completely contrary to it” (personal email, Feb.18/2013). The Israelite priesthood, with a vested interest in the sacrificial system, eventually silenced the voices of the prophets.

**Post 2**

The Jesus Seminar (the latest stage in the history of historical Jesus research) has continued to prepare the way for understanding that there was an actual historical person named Jesus (Joshua Ben Adam) that was notably different from the Christian Jesus Christ. In fact, these are two quite radically different persons with distinctly different core messages. But the Jesus Seminar, for all its good research on the contradictions (dissimilarities) between these two persons, does not appear to have really made clear the central contradiction or dissimilarity. Yes, people like James Robinson offer bits and pieces regarding this great contradiction here and there but present no real coherent and thorough explanation of what is involved. Robinson comes closest in admitting that this is about “the greatest contribution of Jesus to the history of human ideas”. He is referring to the fact that Jesus countered the dominant view of antiquity that deity was about retaliatory justice with a new view of deity as non-retaliatory. And, as he says, this new contribution of Jesus was lost after a generation as Christians returned to the old view of deity undergirding retaliatory justice.

But there is much more going on here in this greatest contribution of Jesus to the history of human ideas. Much more.

Anyway, here is another attempt at refining the presentation of this grand contradiction between Jesus and Christianity, using some hyperbolic language to focus attention and make the point.

**Worst, Greatest, Best, Most- Hyperbole to Focus**

The greatest human blunder ever committed was built on the greatest human error ever made. First, that worst ever error was made by ancient people who assumed that there were retaliating, punishing gods operating behind life. We find their views expressed all through the earliest written mythologies. Later people then refined those primitive beliefs into systems of justice as payback, or eye for eye justice.

The consequences of people believing that the gods engaged in retaliation or punishment has been devastating for humanity all down through history. The belief that retaliation is at the core of reality and life has been more devastating to humanity than any other single perception ever concocted by people. What people think or believe in terms of ultimate reality, they will then practice in their lives by retaliating, seeking revenge, and punishing others (in anthropology this used to be referred to as replicating the divine model in human existence). Retaliation mythology/theology has consequently produced a bloody trail of religiously inspired suffering and death throughout history.

Others, with the dreamer’s gleam in their eye, envisioned an entirely different possibility- that of creating a radically new human existence. Their dreams and voices culminated in the teaching of a Palestinian secular sage known today as Historical Jesus, a distinctly different person from the Christian myth of Christ.

The historical Jesus introduced the most profound and most liberating insight ever made in the long history of human ideas and discovery. He advocated a life of no retaliation and no conditions- no judgment, no punishment, no more eye for eye justice. He urged, instead, an authentically human form of response and relating that would forgive without demanding the making of amends first, that would include all people unconditionally, and that would express generosity toward all alike, whether good or bad. It would even love enemies without condition.

His insights into unconditional love offered humanity the grandest liberation ever dreamed of- freedom from the endless violence of animal-like retaliation into a truly human manner of existence. He offered humanity a fresh and singular opportunity to liberate human consciousness from the darkness of revenge thinking into the light of unlimited forgiveness.

But then the greatest blunder in all history occurred. Jesus’ own followers and later converts (notably the apostle Paul) retreated from his breakthrough insight and reverted back to the payback outlook- choosing to view life in terms of retaliation and conditions. The outcome was two radically opposing ways of viewing reality – the Historical Jesus view and the Christian view.

Christianity then argued for a new super condition of a great blood sacrifice to pay for sin before any forgiveness could be offered. This was retaliation epitomized as never before. And Christianity advocated for severe punishment of any free spirits that would refuse to believe its message of ultimate payback. The outcome was that the Christian religion, that claimed to be the religion of Jesus, completely contradicted his core message of unconditional.

This was arguably the greatest blunder in all history. Christianity built on the worst error ever made- that God was about retaliation and punishment- and confounded this error by rejecting the most profound counter insight to that error- that God was unconditional love. Christianity then missed the best opportunity ever to liberate human consciousness from the darkness of a past enmeshed in base revenge and punishment thinking. Christianity, instead, retreated to payback thinking and created a Christ myth with a dense mess of theology that affirmed and intensified as never before that retaliation/punishment defined the meaning of life. Has there ever been such a complete rejection of Jesus and the gospel of Jesus? No. Never before.

Worst error ever. Most profound insight and liberation ever. Most egregious rejection of the Jesus gospel ever. Greatest blunder ever made. Yes, it all converges there in history’s grandest contradiction- the Jesus/Christianity contradiction.

**Post 3**

This post was sent to a discussion list for feedback. It is a summary of some of the insights that the list has been going over in recent years regarding grand narrative issues. This particular summary is intended (in a somewhat hyperbolic manner- worst/best) to trace out in bare bones fashion some lines of descent of a notable error in ancient thought and a counter to that dehumanizing error. My point is that a single ancient error has fueled all subsequent payback thinking as in apocalyptic systems and salvation systems (this is most religion).

Many people want to know what is really wrong with life and how to change life for the better (note the sites out there on how to make the world a better place and the ideas suggested). I would argue that if you really want to make life better then there is no single more critical thing to get cleared up than this retaliation error that has wreaked so much damage in human consciousness and perception. And the discovery of unconditional response/relating does exactly that. It shows how to make the world better in the most fundamental manner of all. This is root stuff.

And to emphasize just how crucial this core mythological/theological material is to life’s problems, just look at such things as the anti-development activism across the globe today and the personal cost to humanity from this (e.g. anti-fossil fuel activism and resulting fuel poverty). This activism derives from environmental alarmism over such things as climate change. And this alarmism, in turn, is influenced by a more general root problem of apocalyptic perception and belief. This apocalypticism derives further from the root misperception that there is something threatening, something retaliatory behind all (e.g. angry planet, vengeful GAIA, or angry God).

**Roots of apocalyptic myth and Salvationism**

**Wendell Krossa**

People continue to ask me why apocalyptic thinking is still so prominent in public narratives and public consciousness. What is behind apocalyptic thinking? What are the root causes or root things that lead people to believe in an apocalypse or great final end of the world?

There is one singular error made by early people that led to apocalyptic thinking and it has subsequently caused more damage than anything else in history. It has become lodged in human public subconscious and endlessly re-emerges in our grand public narratives to enact further damage.

The error was to believe that there were nasty forces behind reality and life- e.g. gods that engage payback, retaliate, and punish humanity. That error resulted in the creation of the set of explanatory myths known as apocalyptic and the related resolution myths of Salvationism. These have formed the core belief systems of Christianity (see James Tabor’s “Paul and Jesus”), Islam (see Richard Landes’ “Heaven On Earth”), and most historical religion (see Mircea Eliade’s The Myth of the Eternal Return), as well as secular ideologies like environmental alarmism. Apocalyptic mythology explains why life must be ended (all sin must be punished and purged from the world) and Salvationism explains how to resolve the problem of looming punishment (how to escape the anger and apocalyptic punishment of deity).

The core ideas of apocalyptic and Salvationism include such damaging themes as oppositional dualism (saved insiders opposing excluded outsiders), domination (true enlightened believers obliged to correct and change deluded unbelievers), and punishment/destruction (the obligation to exact revenge, retaliation, or payback justice). These themes and the larger mythologies they are part of, apocalyptic and Salvationism, are behind much human fear, despair, violence, and suffering over history. Note, for example, the anti-development or anti-progress activism that arises from the contemporary apocalyptic movement of environmental alarmism, and note especially such horrific outcomes as that from Rachel Carson’s apocalypticism (anti-chemical, anti-DDT) which resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of people, mostly children (for detail see my essay “Rise or Decline?: The Actual Trajectory of Life”).

In general, views of nasty payback gods, and related myths, have validated endless nasty behavior among people. These inhumane systems of myth have missed entirely the unconditional love that actually defines the core of the Source that is behind all reality and life.

And it takes only the briefest surveys of public perception and narratives to observe the continuing presence of apocalyptic and Salvationism in public consciousness. This reveals that ancient mythical errors are still deeply rooted in human subconscious. And it emphasizes again that the root error behind the apocalyptic and salvationism belief systems- angry, payback forces or gods- continues to cause ongoing grief to humanity. Fortunately, the greatest discovery ever in history- the discovery of unconditional love- completely counters this payback error and liberates human consciousness as never before. The ultimate reality behind all is incomprehensibly nice, not nasty (see my essay From Retaliation to Unconditional Love).

But first, before tracing briefly the emergence and development of the payback or retaliation error, it is helpful to acknowledge the role of the human fear of death as the basic impulse behind the creation of mythologies such as apocalyptic. Early people wanted to understand and explain why there was death and they came up with mythic explanations such as that death was a punishment from angry gods for human sin. And the apocalypse was the grand final death of all life, the grand final punishment for all sin. So fear of death motivated people to find explanations for death but they made profound errors in how they understood and explained such things and the result was the distorting systems of mythology know as apocalyptic and Salvationism.

Developing Apocalyptic Mythology

We have enough data from ancient writing- e.g. Sumerian cuneiform tablets- to trace out how this apocalyptic mythology began and how it has developed over history and how the root error of payback gods drove all this distorting mythical explanation.

(Note: The Sumerians produced the earliest writing and the first recorded myths)

Human consciousness entered (or emerged into) humanity long ago in the prehistory era (pre-3000 BCE). Consciousness brought awareness of the wonder of the world and nature. Early people then became aware of some greater power, some creating and sustaining power behind all things, behind all the varied elements of the natural world. They originally saw this in terms of spirits or life forces, such as a great spirit behind animal life (see the research of Joseph Campbell- Masks of God- for more detail on this). This view of forces or spirits was gradually anthropomorphized over time to become gods with very human characteristics projected onto them (gods of sun, moon, water/storm, and so on).

As these elements of nature were often destructive (e.g. storm/flood, lightning/fire, earthquake/tsunami), early people logically assumed the gods were angry and punishing them for their faults, their failure to obey taboos. We find the prototype of this thinking in the Sumerian story of the Enki and the paradise of Dilmun. Enki eats forbidden fruit and the gods strike him with illness. His “sin” apparently ruins the paradise of Dilmun.

This idea of retaliating gods punishing sin is then formed into the first myth of apocalypse, the Sumerian Flood myth. In that myth the god Enlil became angry with people becoming too noisy and so he planned a great flood to annihilate people. This is the first recorded myth of, not just ordinary punishment for individual sin, but of a grand final payback or punishment in the form of a great apocalypse that will end all life and thereby punish all sin.

In that earliest human literature it is evident that people were already viewing the forces behind life as angry, threatening, retaliatory, and punishing. They had concluded that the great reality behind all was about payback retaliation. And they were already prophesying that the payback gods would cause a great final punishment- an apocalypse- that would end the world and all life.

Over subsequent centuries and millennia people further developed a full template of themes around apocalyptic thinking. They stated in more complete form that there had been an original golden age or paradise (this is another core theme present in the early Sumerian myth of Dilmun), that corruption had ruined the original paradise, that humanity had then become separated from the gods and existed in opposition to the gods, and that now all was heading toward a final apocalyptic ending. But a chosen few would be saved into a restored paradise. They would escape the great final punishment and be saved (Sumerian mythology notes one such couple, as do the Biblical accounts).

Then in the historically later Christian version of apocalypse we find another revision in the ongoing development of apocalyptic mythology- a great blood sacrifice was required to pay for sin and placate the angry and threatening deity. This was necessary so that the chosen few could be saved when the world would be purged by fire at the end of history. In this we are seeing the ongoing development of Salvationism as a supporting sub-theme within the apocalyptic template. Salvationism now forms the basis of all religion and it is essentially about conditions to be met in order to be spared the wrath of angry deity and to escape the apocalypse. In Salvationism you must placate the angered or offended gods, you must pay the debt incurred by your sin, and you must offer a blood sacrifice to atone for human corruption and sinfulness.

Salvation religion presents its conditions in numerous religious laws, esoteric theological arguments, complex rituals, carefully proscribed lifestyles, and related demands. Salvationism has caused immense damage over history by reinforcing exclusion (the dualism of saved insiders versus unsaved outsiders), the domination of the right or true ones over the unenlightened ones, and the demand for punishment of those not in the true religion (destruction that is both temporal and eternal- e.g. hell).

This apocalyptic and salvation thinking continues into the present in both religious and secular versions such as environmental alarmism or green religion. These people use the same old apocalyptic template of themes in arguing that wilderness nature was the paradise past, corrupt humanity has ruined that paradise, and now all is heading toward the apocalypse of environmental collapse. The salvation scheme or demanded sacrifice? Remove most people (the corrupted masses) and restore the lost natural paradise where a few enlightened people live simple, primitive lifestyles in harmony with wilderness nature.

A Liberating Counter Narrative

But a great counter narrative to all this dark apocalypticism has also been developing over history. It is an entirely contrasting narrative to the essential payback/punishment orientation of apocalypse and Salvationism. Remember, the profound mistake that early people made was to assume that payback or retaliatory punishment defined the forces/spirits behind all.

The ancients should have known better as they had long known about the human ideal of compassion (see for example, The Prehistory of Compassion by Spikins, Rutherford, and Needham). Human perception of love and compassion had a well-developed tradition in the pre-literature era. And in some of the very earliest human literature we find a clear grasp of non-retaliation or unconditional love, notably in the Akkadian Father’s advice to his son, circa 2000 BCE (see, for example, Wikipedia for detail on this).

Unconditional love is unquestioningly the greatest human ideal ever discovered and it is the polar opposite to payback thinking. It urges no demand for punishment. It argues for no exclusion of anyone- no us versus them dualism, no outsider vs insider, no small band vs small band. It asks for no payment or sacrifice before forgiving. It sets forth no conditions at all to be met before accepting anyone fully or expressing full generosity toward anyone.

Taking the historical relationship that the discovery of authentic human ideals such as unconditional love also applies to our perceptions of deity (as we become more humane so we also humanize our views of God), the insight into unconditional love reveals that there is no angry God behind all, no threat, no retaliation, and no coming punishment. Consequently, there is no need for some sacrifice to appease payback deity or some salvation scheme to escape some punishing apocalypse. Further, there has never been any separation of humanity from God that needs to be healed or broken relationship that needs to be restored. The ultimate reality behind all is incomprehensible unconditional love. There is nothing nasty behind all reality but instead something profoundly nice.

And this great human ideal of unconditional love should be intensely applied to humanity. People are not essentially corrupt as in the old apocalyptic Fall myths (i.e. fallen, sinful humanity ruining paradise). People, instead, share the same consciousness as that of deity, a core consciousness that is defined by unconditional love. The authentic human essence is also love, unconditional love. And yes, there is still a residual animal brain that humanity struggles with but this does not define the core human self or consciousness (see for instance, Jeffrey Schwartz’s You Are Not Your Brain or Karen Armstrong’s Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life).

Unconditional love at the core of all reality and life is the greatest discovery ever made and it powerfully counters the worst error ever made (that payback defined the forces behind all reality and life). Unconditional love calls for a complete rejection of all apocalyptic/salvation thinking, a complete rejection of the payback basis of religion. It demands an entirely new grand narrative of reality and life, a narrative that will inspire hope and liberate human consciousness in new ways.

To conclude: at the root of all religion, at the root of much human endeavor to find meaning and purpose, at the root of most grand human narrative, and at the core of human consciousness and subconscious, there still resides that profound early error that payback punishment defines all things. The damage from this error has been horrific as it has reinforced the expression of endless payback, revenge, and punishment in human societies. And too many people still believe that we- humanity- are corrupt and deserve some form of payback or punishment. Public narratives endlessly reinforce this view of people as corrupt, greedy, and destructive, and deserving some form of payback (e.g. the revenge of GAIA or an angry earth venting against our supposed ruin of nature).

A new narrative has now emerged that re-orients human understanding to the true nature of the reality that is behind all- unconditional love- that defines the essence of all things.

For more detail see my essays “Rise or Decline: The actual trajectory of life” and “From Retaliation to Unconditional Love: The Grand Narrative of Human Exodus” available at [www.wendellkrossa.com](http://www.wendellkrossa.com)

See also Bob Brinsmead’s essay “An Outline of Apocalyptic Theology from Zoroaster to Al Gore” available at [www.irenicpublications.com](http://www.irenicpublications.com)

Just some further thoughts....from another post to a discussion group

The most destructive idea ever conceived in history was not deity but payback embedded in deity.

Bob Brinsmead carefully laid the theological groundwork for rethinking the idea of payback in his many essays challenging such beliefs as atonement (see, for instance, his series on The Scandal of Joshua Ben Adam). That sparked the necessary process of rethinking all payback and clarifying more the core unconditional message of the historical Jesus.

Over history there has been this ongoing conflict between payback/unconditional. As Bob notes, it was there in the prophets challenging the priests and their sacrificial system (the salvation industry). And it reaches an epitome of contrast in the Historical Jesus vs. Christianity contradiction (Payback Paul).

Now I want to further emphasize this contrast of worst error (most enslaving idea in history) against the best insight/ideal (the most liberating idea in history). The greatest error vs. the greatest discovery. These two contrary  perceptions that fueled the 2 grand narratives of rise and decline, or apocalyptic and exodus. A narrative of despair vs. a narrative of hope.

The important thing to note is the damage linkage in this (to get these relationships and linkages clear). For example, the fact that early payback thinking in deity led to the development of apocalyptic and salvation mythology, apocalyptic being a more complete explanation of payback (the demand for a final and complete punishment and purging of sin). And include here all those supporting themes that have been so damaging to human existence- things like oppositional dualism (blessed insiders, cursed outsiders, or true vs. false religions, and so on). And the need to take retaliatory revenge by punishing enemies or outsiders.

This worst error ever, and its resulting mythologies, has long inflamed fear in populations and the response has always been deadly for many. Whether the outright killing of enemies as in Christian history, and now Islam (Landes in Heaven on Earth), or in many other salvation schemes such Hitler’s holocaust (Herman on Spengler’s apocalyptic fear-mongering). The damaging outcome of apocalyptic is also seen in Rachel Carson venting apocalyptic fear over chemicals/DDT and the resulting cost to millions, mainly children. Or the global warming alarmism and anti-fossil fuel salvation response that has led to fuel poverty and such things as the 1 million extra deaths in Britain over the past few decades (CCNet).

So my challenge to emphasize- if you really want to change life for the better (and there are many sites out there devoted to this theme and proposed plans of action in response) then there is no more important root issue to tackle than this payback/unconditional thing at the root of historical human consciousness or subconscious. It fuels our narratives which inspire our emotions and responses/actions in human society.

The worst error ever and best discovery/insight ever. This is getting to the real root of things.

**Email post Aug.3/2013**

Let me add on my interjection below (Jesus’ core teaching was about non-retaliation) that Jesus was already making the non-retaliation point clear in Q1. There is one section there that is identical to Matt.5:38-48 though is only a brief summarized statement of that larger section in  Matthew.

In this post below I have mainly paraphrased Mack’s comments (without noting every statement as his- most of the content below, though not quoted, consists of Mack’s direct statements, or summaries).

**Burton Mack on the Q gospel**

This is a summary of some interesting things that happened in the development of the Q (Quelle) gospel history (Q being the very earliest collection of Jesus’ teaching, the earliest gospel). This applies to our own concerns with the Christian rejection of Jesus’ non-retaliation gospel (unconditional love) by his own followers and their return to retaliatory justice such as in Paul’s gospel, an entirely different gospel to that of Historical Jesus.

Burton Mack traces the discovery of two notable layers in Q- Q1 and Q2. Q1 was an original collection of Jesus’ sayings (the very earliest of all) that focused on wisdom or sage sayings. It did not have any apocalyptic content. The apocalyptic tone and content was introduced later in Q2.

Apocalyptic statements are notable to our argument because they show the rejection of non-retaliation and the return to retaliation thinking. Apocalyptic is about ultimate retaliation, punishment, and judgment.

This is all good groundwork to what we are focusing on- the great contradiction between Jesus and Paul, or Jesus and Christianity, and how this happened and what it is about at core. This has to do with the grand narratives. It is all critical to sorting out the argument that Jesus had a distinct gospel message of non-retaliation and his followers drastically changed that back into a message of divine retaliation and necessary atonement, an entirely opposite message that undermined and even buried the gospel of Jesus about unconditional love. There is a profound contradiction between Jesus and Paul or Jesus and Christianity. And this is clearly evident in works such as Mack’s but is not as publicly understood as it should be.

While Mack and other scholars provide excellent evidence they do not bring forth the full implications of their research. They provide great evidence of the history behind the development of Jesus’ gospel and later Christian myth making (Paul’s payback gospel) but do not state the profound consequences of all this.

**Mack’s “The Lost Gospel”**

Mack covers the essence of this Q shift from wisdom to apocalyptic in his chapter 2, An Uncommon Wisdom. He starts by noting that Adolf Harnack, a historian of early Christianity, published a book of Jesus’ sayings in 1908. He wanted to know just what Jesus was actually saying before the mythology of his later followers was built around him, as in the narrative gospels. He wanted to eliminate the “problem of miracle and myth” to get at what liberal theologians considered to be the essence of Christianity. 19th Century liberals believed that Jesus was a teacher of elevated and humane ethics and that these set the standard for a civilized world. According to them, Jesus introduced to the world a new age of reason that was the highest human ideal.

But this liberal Jesus was in trouble as there was growing excitement about the presence of apocalyptic language in the preaching of Jesus. This had come out in books in the late 1800s. The interest was in relating these apocalyptic statements to Jesus’ statements on the kingdom of God (putting these two themes together- kingdom of God and future judgment). Some came up with the view of Jesus as a proclaimer of an imminent apocalyptic transformation of the world (Schweitzer was instrumental in pushing this view). This caused uncertainty among other Jesus researchers because it was a shift in paradigm from Jesus as teacher of humane ethic to Jesus as radical visionary of the cataclysmic end of the world.

The apocalyptic excitement could not be ignored and to counter it required taking a hard look at the early texts. As Mack notes, no one thought it necessary to actually study the sayings of Jesus in rigorous historical perspective. The apocalyptic emphasis was simply accepted as undeniable. As a result, the noble liberal Jesus was fading. Q research at that time did not help because Q also contained the apocalyptic announcements. Hence, embarrassment emerged over the growing image of Jesus as apocalyptic prophet. But it was also recognized that the teaching of Jesus still contained a great deal of instruction that was better classed as wisdom than apocalyptic. This caused confusion because “the languages of wisdom and apocalyptic assume different views of the world, and scholars have found it difficult to imagine how Jesus may have merged them in a single message” (p.31).

Let me interject here for emphasis- Jesus’ core teaching on unconditional response and relating is clearly about non-retaliation (no judgment or punishment) and he related that clearly to God also (even in Q1). But in contrast, apocalyptic is all about retaliation, judgment, and ultimate punishment. These are two entirely opposite views.

By the 1920s scholars had come up with three proposals to resolve this conflict between the wisdom sayings of Jesus and the apocalyptic statements. Rudolf Bultmann and C. H. Dodd were key to these resolutions.

1. Bultmann offered that the apocalyptic sayings were foremost and the wisdom sayings added later by the church to present an ethic for the present age before the apocalypse would occur. The wisdom sayings were considered secondary additions.
2. Another solution was the view that the teaching of Jesus was eschatological, meaning last or extreme. The new age Jesus initiated was so different from the social world of that time that apocalyptic idiom was appropriate to announce this new age. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet announcing a new age. This is much like V\_\_\_\_’s view that apocalyptic can refer to the passing of an old worldview and the introduction of a new one.
3. The third solution was that Jesus’ parables were metaphors of the kingdom of God and announced that the kingdom could be imagined as some future advent, a kind of mixture of already present but still reserved for the future that came to be known as “realized eschatology”.

This view is still popular, that the parables explain the odd mix of wisdom and eschatology in Jesus’ teaching.

Attention then turned to explaining Q, a collection of Jesus’ sayings made by first century followers of Jesus. Effort turned to understanding what actually happened in Q and what clues were there to help solve this problem of the odd (contradictory) mixture of wisdom and apocalyptic statements.

A breakthrough came in 1945 with the Nag Hammadi discovery of the Gospel of Thomas. It was very much like Q and provided material for a comparative study with Q. The gospel of Thomas “was thoroughly non-apocalyptic in tenor and it contained sayings from the very earliest period of the Jesus movements” (p.37-38).

James Robinson then made another breakthrough in 1964. He concluded that Q was a common form of wisdom literature, “the sayings of the sages”. He argued that those who collected the sayings of Jesus in Q and the Thomas gospel did so on the model of a wisdom genre.  This provoked more detailed studies. If Robinson’s view was right then “the idiom of wisdom, not apocalyptic, was fundamental to the collection” (p.35). The wisdom collections functioned as handbooks of instruction, “sapiential instruction”.

Others continued to argue that apocalyptic, the theme of judgment, functioned as a principle of organization in Q. This, scholars argued, was not peripheral but integral to Q’s organizational structure. But then a further key breakthrough occurred- Robinson’s thesis was revised to argue that Q had taken shape in stages. “The earliest layer of material was indeed a collection of instructions on the wisdom model”. The prophetic and apocalyptic sayings were also a layer and the announcement of judgment was indeed the principle of organization of Q at this second stage of composition.

The outcome was that Robinson was considered right and a sequence was established...”First, there was a collection of sayings organized as sapiential instruction. Later these were incorporated into a composition that developed the theme of judgment by using prophetic and apocalyptic discourse. There was no literary evidence that suggested a reverse sequence” (p.37). Both collections functioned differently and entered the history of composition at a different time. The wisdom sayings were typical of the earliest layer of Q. So, as for Jesus, “It would mean that he had probably been more the sage, less the prophet”. And as for Christian origins, “It would mean that something other than an apocalyptic message and motivation may have impelled the new movement and defined its fundamental attraction”.

Some cautiously admitted that it now appeared that the “apocalyptic sayings were added to Q at a second stage of composition, they were not taken from oral tradition as early as that from which the wisdom sayings derived” (p.37). Others were more bluntly ready to see the “stratigraphy of Q as additional evidence for a non-apocalyptic Jesus”. The evidence was mounting for the non-apocalyptic background for the kingdom of God and it was accepted then “that the Gospel of Thomas was thoroughly non-apocalyptic in tenor and contained sayings from the very earliest period of the Jesus movements”. There was a growing consensus that Jesus was first remembered for his wisdom.

So if Jesus was a non-apocalyptic prophet then how to explain the presence of apocalyptic language? Conventional wisdom had assumed an apocalyptic imagination at the beginning and a shift to the language of wisdom. Now the sequence was seen as working the other way around. “The shift was not from apocalyptic announcement to instruction on wisdom, but from wisdom to apocalyptic” (p.38). as Mack says, this switch forced a total reconsideration of Christian origins. And so much more. Mack offers some concluding comment in this chapter on social currents that may have influenced wisdom and apocalyptic thinking.

For us, and our work on grand narratives, it is affirming evidence that the followers of Jesus (Christianity) rejected his historically unique gospel of non-retaliation or unconditional love for a retreat to archaic retaliation and atonement mythology. This distorted entirely the original gospel of Jesus. It was a complete rejection of the liberating gospel of Jesus. The outcome is monumental. Christianity, or Paul’s apocalyptic retaliation gospel, has subverted entirely the message of Jesus.