Did Jesus support a violent revolt against Rome? The one argument that probably gets used more than any other in support of that view is that when Jesus gets arrested in the Gospels, his followers pull out their swords to fight. What are they doing with swords? Why are they fighting? Since this is in all the Gospels (independently attested) and since it’s not a story that later Christians would be likely to make up (since they would want to portray Jesus to their Roman audiences as peace-loving, not as a rabble-rouser) — wouldn’t that show that it’s something that really happened? And if so, then clearly Jesus was interested in arming his followers and fighting the authorities.

That’s how the argument goes, and it’s a very good one. But after some long reflection, I don’t find it convincing. Here is how I discussed the matter in my book *Jesus Before the Gospels* (the only book title that I deeply regret! No one knows what it’s about but it’s unusually important: it’s about how memory works and how distorted memories affected the stories about Jesus that were being passed around by word of mouth in the years before they were written down by the Gospel writers):

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In all four Gospels, at least one of Jesus’ followers is armed when he is arrested. In the Synoptics, this unnamed follower draws his sword and strikes the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear (see Mark 14:47). In John’s Gospel we learn that the sword-bearing disciple was Peter (John 18: 10). Jesus puts a halt to his follower’s violent inclination, however, and humbly submits to his arrest. In Luke’s version he does so only after healing the ear (Luke 22:51).

From the eighteenth century until the present day (starting with Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the first scholar to write a critical study of the historical Jesus in the modern period), there have been scholars, and non-scholars, who have thought that this incident in the garden is both altogether plausible and indicative of the character of Jesus’ message and mission. In this opinion, the incident must be historical for a rather simple reason. What later Christian would make up such a story? When Christians were telling and retelling their accounts of Jesus’ life in the years after his death, of course they would want him to appear entirely palatable to their audiences. Nothing would make Jesus more palatable in Roman eyes than the view that he was a peace-loving promoter of non-violence, not a violent insurrectionist against Rome. If Jesus allowed his followers to be armed, however, that would suggest he was in favor of them carrying out acts of violence. If later Christians would not make up the idea that Jesus’ promoted violence, then no one could make up the idea that his followers were armed. Following this logic, the story of the sword in the garden is not an invented tradition but a historical fact. Jesus’ followers, therefore, were armed. Moreover, if they were armed, so this reasoning goes, then Jesus must have anticipated and even promoted an armed rebellion.

There’s a good deal of sense to this view and it is easy to see why it is attractive. Still, at the end of the day I don’t find it convincing. This is for two reasons...

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