

1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul (2000) "On Jesus: Quests for Historicity, and the History of Recent Quests," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 94, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol94/iss1/2>

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ON JESUS: QUESTS FOR HISTORICITY, AND THE HISTORY OF RECENT QUESTS

PAUL ANDERSON

Of the great storm centers of media-covered religious topics in recent years, none has been more vigorous than the set of discussions revolving around renewed quests for the historical Jesus. The quests themselves are not new, but they have drawn increasing interest due to their treatment in the media and the novel approaches put forward by recent scholars. Of course, the reason for the interest is that the portrait one sketches of what Jesus “really” said and did has huge implications for later generations. Obviously, impressions of Jesus will play normative roles among Christians and Jesus adherents, but the moral impact of Jesus’ example upon society at large is unparalleled in Western civilization, and even within world history. What is thought of Jesus’ life and teachings speaks with such authority that even the irreligious are affected by it. Hence, the weightiness of the quest and its implications.

Quakers have themselves contributed to the interest over the years, often indirectly. George Fox, Robert Barclay, Samuel Fisher, William Penn, and others challenged the Christianity of their day with a vision of the way of Jesus and the pattern of the apostles, and Friends have long emphasized the priority of Jesus’ teachings and example over their distortions that tend to accrue within our religious systems. While Quaker interests in the Living Christ often dominate our discussions, Friends have still based our testimonies on matters of peace, integrity, simplicity, plain speech, ministry, worship, and justice on the example and teachings of Jesus — understood as a historically compelling example. Even the willingness of Friends to suffer and die at the hands of magistrates has been patterned after the model of the gospel Passion narratives, and such connections are made explicitly within early Quaker writings. These are but a few examples of the difference one’s impression of the real Jesus can have upon a movement.

From another angle, the Jesus of history is rather insignificant when compared with the Christ of faith. Especially for Friends, the

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main emphasis of faith and practice centers on the risen Christ, accessible both in solitude and in the gathered meeting (Matthew 18:20).¹ Likewise, the Light of Christ enlightens everyone coming into the world (John 1:9), and the question is whether humans will open themselves to the saving/revealing Light of Christ and effectively respond to his leadings today rather than focusing retrospectively upon first-century appraisals.

Then again, what do we make of the various portrayals of Jesus made famous in the media? Did Jesus really exist, or was he simply a Christian fabrication?² Was he a Cynic, who challenged institutions in irreverent sorts of ways,³ or was he a Sage and purveyor of subversive wisdom?⁴ Perhaps he was a Holy Man⁵ in the tradition of ancient healers and exorcists, or a charismatic Jew,⁶ or maybe the best way to regard Jesus is within the tradition of the Hebrew Prophets who declared the word of God with eschatological finality.⁷ Are the portraits of Jesus in the four canonical gospels trustworthy?⁸ Even so, how do we account for their differences as well as their similarities? Of course, many excellent presentations of the historical Jesus have been produced recently with more modest claims to innovation, and these deserve consideration as well.⁹

With the renewed interest in the “real” Jesus in the media over the last two decades, how do we make sense of the more publicized of recent Jesus portraits? Do we simply choose the one seeming to support best our own commitments and inclinations, or are there ways to evaluate recent quests that have integrity and a sound basis for judgment? Granted, Christians have often crafted their portrayals of Jesus with orthodox investments in mind, but attempts to make Jesus palatable to secular Americans, or inoffensive within a state university world-religions course, are by no means free of image tampering themselves. If this is the case, some appeals to “historicity” may reflect less of an intrinsic concern to know the truth and more as legitimators of deconstructive or revisionist agendas. Then again, if any of the new approaches being used actually cast valuable light on our capacity to know what the original Jesus might have been saying and doing, this may indeed be helpful, and we must consider the implications of such findings.

Obviously, an essay of this length cannot treat any of these issues exhaustively, but it will attempt to lay out some of the history of the discussions and offer some assessments of several recent portrayals of Jesus, including a working bibliography at the end of the essay. It also

discusses some of the tools being used by current scholars, including their strengths and weaknesses. In so doing, one hopes the reader will be helped in making sense of some of the recent discussions in the media, but more importantly, in gaining an insight or two about the complexion of the “real Jesus” and resulting implications. Put otherwise, the present essay is on Jesus: quests for historicity, and the history of recent quests.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL-JESUS DISCUSSIONS

The history of modern Jesus scholarship has been a fascinating one, involving a variety of approaches to the task.

a) *The Early Quest*. Most scholars associate the origin of the modern quests for the “historical” Jesus with the contribution of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, whose work was published after his death in 1768.¹⁰ Reimarus had published on a variety of topics, but it was his essays on “The Purpose of Jesus and His Disciples” that made the greatest long-term contribution. The German playwright, Gotthold Lessing, published these essays, which had been locked in a desk and otherwise unknown. Among them Reimarus argued several points, including the notion that the political goals of Jesus should be understood within the context of other Jewish first-century Messianic prophets, who sought to deliver Palestine from Roman occupation. Upon their disappointment over his death, Jesus’ followers spiritualized his mission, supposedly stole his body and made up the story of the resurrection. They revised the portrayal of his ministry in ways vastly different from its “historical” realities to suit their own religious purposes, and this included themes related to miracles and the establishment of an institution, the church.

Not all of these notions were novel. In fact, the claim that Jesus’ followers had stolen his body was recounted within the Matthean tradition as a discrediting accusation levied against Jesus’ adherents by Jewish leaders from the earliest days up until the time when Matthew was written (Matthew 28:11-15) around 85 CE. What was significant was the impact Reimarus’ writings had upon the intelligentsia of German society and beyond. Strong denunciations were brought forward by Johannes Semler and others, and yet, the interest in recovering Jesus’ actual goal and purpose in the light of first-century Judaism was irreversibly set. Likewise, the contributions of Friedrich

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Schleiermacher and David Strauss¹¹ ensured the quest for the historical Jesus was well under way. Especially within Germany the combination of Lutheran biblical authority, theological sophistication, and scientific rationalism made the ensuing quests far more than religious pursuits alone. They evoked the most rigorous of intellectual endeavors, raising the stakes of naturalistic explorations to matters of ultimate concern. This is why Albert Schweitzer's book (1910:1) begins with the audacious, yet not overstated claim:

When, at some future day, our period of civilisation shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time. For nowhere save in the German temperament can there be found in the same perfection the living complex of conditions and factors — of philosophic thought, critical acumen, historical insight, and religious feeling — without which no deep theology is possible.

And the greatest achievement of German theology is the critical investigation of the life of Jesus.

b) *The Liberal Quests for Jesus*. The early quest flowered into a set of other investigations producing dozens of liberal “lives of Jesus.” Based on the model of the Greek rhetorical biography, and building on the two-source hypothesis, such scholars as Holtzmann and Renan¹² accompanied Strauss in producing portraits of Jesus as the exemplary human being. Incidentally, these portraits of Jesus tended to resemble the values and commitments of the particular scholar, and while the imitation of Christ has been a classic pursuit within Western civilization, the results of such “objective” studies came into question. Indeed, the criticism that these “historical” investigations tended to involve scholars looking into the well of their subject and seeing their own reflections at the bottom of the well was a valid one. Because of Schweitzer's devastating critique in his epoch-making book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, the optimism of the liberal quests came to a grinding halt.

Add to that the horrific impact of the first World War upon the false optimism of established liberalism, and the quest for the historical Jesus would never be the same again. It is estimated that nearly 60 million Christians were killed largely by other Christians in that war — more people than had been killed by others in the entirety of human history combined — and yet the portraits of a humanitarian

Jesus had been of no avail in posing an alternate path. All of this came on the heels of modern assurances that humans were moving upward morally toward enlightenment and the likeness of the exemplary human being, Jesus, the subject of a century of rigorous investigation. What followed was nearly half a century where the quest for the historical Jesus lay fallow as a dead-end investigation. We might call this the “no quest”¹³ for the historical Jesus.

c) *The “No Quest” for the Historical Jesus.* This description of the first half of the twentieth century overstates the reality, as many investigations of Jesus’ life and ministry continued to be written,¹⁴ but this era did witness the abandonment of attempts to reconstruct biographically the ministry career of Jesus. What developed otherwise was interest in the traditional development between the life of Jesus and the finalization of the material in the gospels. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the dialectical theologians gained the ascendancy in continental theology and beyond. After all, we are not saved by history or by natural theology, taught Karl Barth, but by the saving Word of God alone. It is the Divine Initiative that is the sole hope for humanity, and what the world needs is the message of Jesus come, crucified, and raised again to redeem a fallen world, declared Barth. Theology is not theology unless it preaches, and he therefore set out to write the greatest theological treatise of the century (all nine volumes of *Church Dogmatics*, at around 1,000 pages per volume) as his major life’s work.

On the New Testament side of things, Rudolf Bultmann, clearly the most influential biblical scholar of the century, stood with Barth in affirming that we are saved not by history, but by faith — the believing response of humanity to God’s saving initiative in Christ Jesus. It is the “that-ness” of the Christ event (*dass*), not the explanation of it (*wie*), which is the center of evangelical proclamation, he asserted, and the truth of the Gospel is evidenced by the way it speaks to our existential lives, calling for a decision of faith. Influenced by Schweitzer and others, Bultmann assumed there was very little to be known about the Jesus of history. Therefore, he pressed on, working with ancient manuscripts and literature, producing explanations for how the stories of the gospels came together if their connection to historical events were excised from the discussion.

By now scholars had come to notice several things about gospel traditions, and their investigations searched out what could be inferred about the forms, uses, and character of pre-gospel material.

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For instance, much of Mark's material seems fragmentary and clumped together by a collector of Jesus stories and Jesus teachings. Indeed, many of Mark's "paragraphs" are only a sentence or two long (we call them "pericopes" — independent units able to be "cut out" of the larger narrative cloth for analysis), and they may have had independent functions and histories before being gathered by Mark. So what might those functions have been, and how did the use of the material within the early church influence its crafting and presentation? We would no doubt agree that a parable functions differently from a miracle story, but were there differences of form and function within the larger categories as well? Did some miracles reflect a theology of wonder works from a divine-agent figure that may have been different from Jesus' apparent concern for subtlety and compassion-related action? Did some parables convey wisdom-related insights while some of them conveyed pronouncements of divine judgment? These are not bad questions to be asking, and sustained interest in the formation of gospel material led scholars during this era to focus on the history of gospel traditions over and above the historical Jesus proper. On these matters Henry Cadbury made major contributions in his studies on Luke/Acts, and he first introduced European form-critical scholarship to English-speaking audiences.¹⁵

Using an outrageous combination of methodologies, Bultmann produced historical explanations for the development of the material underlying the gospels as rooting in the religious histories of the times. He built on largely faulty assumptions that the ancient Jewish culture and worldview was radically different from Greek ones, and he also arranged his schema of tradition histories along the lines of theological groupings in order to highlight the origins of apparently differing theological strands within the gospel materials. For instance, the author of John supposedly employed a Jewish "signs source" with a miracle-man inclination (with which the evangelist disagreed) as well as a "revelation-sayings" source (in contrast with the evangelist's incarnational christology). These moves seek to account for the origin of the material as rooted in the borrowing from religious traditions independent from the Synoptics, and they also function as an attempt to account for the theological tensions in John.¹⁶ Bultmann then backed up his source designations with an amazing set of arguments from gnostic texts and extra-biblical Jewish literature, and his exegetical skills and theological sensitivity made his overall contribution impossible to ignore.

Ironically, while Bultmann's theology was conservative and evangelical, his willingness to discard the historicity of gospel traditions earned him a villainous reputation among many who would otherwise have been most sympathetic with his evangelical and pastoral concerns. One might even argue that it was his evangelistic concern to reach members of the scientific era with a Jesus liberated from the mythological straitjackets of the ancient world that evoked the greatest resistance from conservative Christians. Bultmann bolstered his hypotheses by means of "scientific" explanations for how this non-historical Jesus material might have come together. Fundamentalists and some evangelicals saw him as eroding the authority of Scripture, but in doing so, they exposed an unwitting preference for the authority of historicity over inspiration. This may also suggest why the "historical" Jesus is such a captivating interest at the height of the modern era. In modernism, the *fact* is assumed to be the measure of Truth; and interests in the objective overshadow subject and content while the former is normally the object of the latter. As Hans Küng (1966:415f.) put it so well, Truth is beyond mere facticity. It must become real to us existentially for it to make a difference, and the dialectical theologians had their eye centrally on the focus of the Gospel: God's saving initiative at work through Christ Jesus rather than historicity proper.

d) *The "New Quest" for the Historical Jesus.* The "no quest" for the historical Jesus was supplanted by the "New Quest for the historical Jesus" during the 1950s and following.¹⁷ Ernst Käsemann, that student of Bultmann's who made a career for himself largely from disagreeing with his mentor, delivered an address in 1953 on the question of the historical Jesus. Käsemann asked whether the quest can really be left alone, despite our inability ever to know who Jesus really was. We must at least address the question of what sort of man he was and what he came to do. Käsemann also felt affirming Jesus' Jewishness might have averted the anti-Jewish fascism that had so devastated the world in the Holocaust.

Others joined the New Quest, and Günther Bornkamm and Ernst Fuchs did so arguing that the perspective of Christian faith should be considered as integral to the quest rather than off limits. While Bornkamm and others left behind the biographic interests of the prior century's quests, they did build upon the likely foundation of his being a teacher and sought to distill what they could about the content of Jesus' teachings and the impact such insights might have

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upon understanding the character of his mission. Norman Perrin, for instance, compiled a list of an irreducible minimum of authentic Jesus sayings he felt any self-respecting scholar would affirm as the historical bedrock of Jesus' teachings, although his skeptical approach followed the motto: "When in doubt, leave it out." The full blossom of this skeptical resolve may be seen in the results of the Jesus Seminar. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library in the late 1940s our understandings of early Judaism and emerging Christianity have been enhanced immensely. The impact of these investigations will continue to be felt within the world of Jesus studies for some time, and these findings and the use of new methodologies have led to the next phase of the quest.

e) *The "Third Quest" for the Historical Jesus.* Over the last two decades a new set of Jesus investigations has emerged, but this time with special sensitivity to the Jewishness of Jesus based on emerging discoveries about first-century Judaism and socio-religious inferences of what he may have been up to. Geza Vermes, for instance, reminded us all that Jesus was indeed a Jew; John Riches explored Jesus' goal regarding the transformation of Judaism; and Ed Sanders and James Charlesworth have developed graphic portrayals of first-century Judaism and Jesus' place within it. These scholars, along with Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, John Meier, and others, have been numbered by N. T. Wright among "the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus,"¹⁸ and this new explosion of Jesus studies represents the greatest interest the subject has ever known.

Whereas earlier quests had struggled with what to do with Jesus and Judaism, present scholars see this as key to understanding who he was and how the movement in his name emerged. Some of the most important approaches have asked what roles religion plays in the organization of society, including effects upon stability and change. For instance, when we think of the particular roles of Sadducees as organizers of Temple worship in Jerusalem in contrast to the concerns of Pharisees as advocates of Scripture and adherence to the Law of Moses, new insights emerge. One system works around a variety of cultic concerns and would have represented the wealthiest sector of Judaism. Sadducees would have been likely contacts with Roman occupiers and would likely have been regarded as betraying the spiritual heart of Judaism by the populace. When you see Jesus confronting these authorities by cleansing the Temple and dining with "sinners" this background casts Jesus' actions into sharp relief.

Jesus is seen to be an agent of radical social change, challenging religious institutions toward reform in the name of God.

Conversely, when you consider Pharisaic concerns to ensure the blessedness of Israel by means of enforcing a system of covenant loyalty marked by keeping not only the Law of Moses, but an ever-growing “hedge” around it, many aspects of Jesus’ work become clearer to us. Notice that he gets to the heart of the Law rather than focusing on the boundary of acceptability. From considering this inclination, we gain insights not so much into the content of what Jesus taught, but *how* he taught.¹⁹ Likewise, from considering Jesus’ use of religious language and actions as provocations, we gain glimpses of how he was trying to carry out his “goals” and receive insights into the content of his mission. Religious anthropology, rhetorical analyses (ancient and modern), socio-linguistic analysis, ideological criticism, and psychological investigations add a variety of new tools to the venture, each with its particular assets and limitations.

Alongside this development, the “Jesus Seminar” has emerged as an attempt to get the findings of some New Testament scholars into popular media where their opinions can have a chance to impact the masses. In addition to this interest, the primary target of Robert Funk and the Weststar Institute has been the reluctance of conservative Christianity to embrace critical scholars’ opinions of what Jesus said and did. Again, note the central role of the implications of our Jesus portraits. If the historical Jesus is seen to be making strict religious demands on his followers and is understood in terms of divine nature and works, appeals to the Gospel follow as direct implications of who Jesus was and what he came to do. If, on the other hand, other understandings emerge that challenge religious piety in favor of a more relevant Jesus, this has its appeal as well. Whatever the case, the Jesus Seminar has certainly succeeded at one thing: getting coverage by the media! Five best-selling books on Jesus, according to Marcus Borg,²⁰ are written by Jesus Seminar scholars, and interest is augmented by responses — positive and negative — to their work.²¹

The practice of the seminar has been to meet twice a year, working systematically through all the sayings attributed to Jesus, and likewise, his reported deeds. They assign the writing of an opinion on the degree of historicity attributable to a particular saying or action, discuss the paper, and those present “vote” on its degree of authenticity by means of casting one of four colors of marbles. One casts a red

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marble if it definitely sounds like Jesus, pink if it sounds likely, gray if it sounds unlikely, and black if it does not appear to go back to Jesus. The votes are then tabulated, and the saying is accorded a particular color in the new translation of the New Testament they have produced. This paraphrase (not really a translation proper) attempts to render the gospels in secular language rather than religious language, and yet, a Jesus who takes God's name in vain for emphasis is problematic and may thus overextend poetic license. They also include the Gospel of Thomas in *The Five Gospels*, and it is accorded twice as many red and pink sections as those attributed to Mark and John combined!²² Needless to say, claiming primacy for Thomas and Q, and then locating their book in the streams of Galileo, Jefferson, and Strauss, make it anything but a modest effort. It is a venture designed to provoke!

With strategized playing to the media at every turn, the Jesus Seminar not only has garnered more than its share of press, it has also evoked its share of criticism from other scholars.²³ Among the criticism most worthy of consideration: 1) Trying opinions in the press before submitting them to the larger body of scholars (not that they are closed to other scholars) casts the venture more in the light of a publicity stunt than a deliberative, academic endeavor. Granted, academicians may be more readily disposed to considering a thesis if it has received media attention, but journalists looking for a story may not be the most discerning of editors when it comes to what is covered and how it is nuanced. 2) Claiming to speak on behalf of biblical scholars in general is misleading. Of some 200 scholars who have associated themselves with the project over the last decade and a half, only about 70 are fellows (rather than participants), and not all of them have Ph.D.s or compelling credentials. Further, the number at any given conference will range from the 30s into the 40s, so the voting cannot even be taken as representative of the entire seminar membership, let alone the majority of biblical scholars. If you count the American community of biblical scholars, including those who have Ph.D.s and/or are teaching Bible as a profession, this number would be closer to 10,000. 3) The group is also self-selecting by virtue of its agenda. There are hundreds of other Jesus scholars who are not members of the seminar, and if their opinions were consulted, the marbles would be cast in very different patterns. In arousing the interest for the project, Robert Funk and others promised the Jesus Seminar would wrest Jesus from the fundamentalists, televan-

gelists, and conservative Christianity and defy traditional impressions of Jesus with the results of critical scholarly opinion. I know of several scholars who, because of this narrow and slanted agenda, decided not to pay their \$75 and request to be accepted as a fellow of Weststar Institute. This does not mean they are not interested in the Jesus of history or critical appraisals of the field; it does suggest the partisan character of the venture, which qualifies its value. The same would be true if a group of fundamentalist Bible teachers and preachers got together and conducted their own voting to “wrest Jesus from liberal scholarship.” The already convinced would become even more certain of their convictions, and critics would look at the self-selecting process skeptically. One difference here is that producing a secularized Jesus for a secular audience may receive more media-related notice than the weight of the argument merits.

4) A fourth problem is the method of voting. The good thing about it is that scholars finally get off the fence and make a judgment about something. In that sense, a great asset of the process is that we have a tabulation of the accorded historical weight of a given saying or deed by the particular members of the Jesus Seminar who were present at the time when a particular paper or set of papers were delivered on the topic. That is interesting, in and of itself! However, no ability to explain one’s hesitations or one’s confidences is conveyed by this method. Unlike the Quaker decision-making process, where the clear articulation of a concern by a weighty Friend can turn the tide of a meeting or qualify an opinion, this process is individualistic. It thereby fails to distinguish between which scholars were casting which marbles, and why. One’s reading of the results might indeed be affected if it were known that scholars x, y, and z (experts on the passage) voted with red and pink marbles, while twenty others cast a black or gray marble on a particular saying. In speaking with Marcus Borg several years ago, he mentioned the difficulty with the gray and pink areas. Passages may be coded as gray or pink because of a few red or black marbles in the mix, whereas the overall inclination of the group may have been more certain. In that sense, the middle two categories may simply indicate a divided set of opinions. Nonetheless, we do have the results of a collective judgment process, and whether *The Five Gospels* marks the tip of the iceberg foreshadowing things to come, or whether it represents the far end of a pendulum’s swing ready to come the other way, no one will be able to say. I did put this question to a member of the seminar recently, and

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the response was interesting. This person said the most liberal of the seminar members tended to be those without Ph.D.s and who also seemed to be older, often pastors or retired pastors within liberal churches. One is not sure what to make of such an observation, but it may serve to contextualize some of the claims of the project.

A DIGEST OF WORTHY CONSTRUCTION MATERIAL?

What, if anything, do we take away from the last couple of centuries of gospel scholarship? Some approaches are dead ends, but others really are worth building on, and at the risk of leaving many valid approaches out, we might consider a digest of worthy construction material for building adequate understandings of the history of gospel traditions and their common central subject: Jesus.

a) *The Synoptic Hypothesis and Editorial Analysis.* Matthew, Mark, and Luke consider the ministry of Jesus through a largely similar lens, and this is why we call them the “Synoptic” Gospels. Further, about 90 percent of Mark is included word for word in Matthew, and about 60 percent of Mark is included in Luke. Also, Mark is more terse, rough, and choppy, and it seems therefore less developed and more primitive than the others. Most scholars therefore agree that Mark was probably written first (in the 60s), and that Matthew and Luke incorporated Mark into their gospel accounts. When you consider the sorts of commonalities between Matthew and Luke (over 200 verses of material) that are not in Mark (the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Temptation narratives, and many parables), it makes us wonder if another source (scholars call it “Q” for the German word, *Quelle*, which means “source” or “fountain”) might have been used besides Mark. This seems quite likely, and it was probably a collection of Jesus sayings circulated for preaching and edification in the church.²⁴ The value of this two-source theory is that developments can be inferred as material moves from Mark to Matthew and Luke, lending insights into what may have been earlier and later traditional material. We also come to see the gospel writers as theologians in their own rights, and their interpretive views are important aspects of historical content to consider.

b) *Tradition Analysis.* Even if Mark’s gospel is deemed earliest, it still incorporated tradition with its own history before being gathered by the evangelist. So what might have been the history and develop-

ment of Mark's tradition? Did some of its crafting relate to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the late 60s and the persecution of Christians under Nero from 54-68? In collecting Jesus stories, are Mark's emphases upon the Messianic Secret, the cost of discipleship, and the way of the cross particular to the narrator's theologizing work, or do these Marcan themes go back to his tradition, and even to Jesus?²⁵ Likewise, similar questions loom for analyzing the traditions of the other gospels and hypothetical Q. Luke and Matthew also operate as theologians and collectors of Jesus material, and while some of their crafting reflects later concerns, they were not just making things up. They were drawing upon earlier traditions rooting in the ministry of Jesus and their representation over the decades. Likewise, John and Q. As more becomes known about the distinctive traditions underlying each of the gospels, better estimations are possible regarding the particular history of each motif and passage. Put otherwise, all the material in the gospels is historical. The question is: "What particular historical context does each bit of material represent?"

c) *Form Analysis and Narrative Use.* As mentioned above, when something is known about the literary form of a scriptural unit, other things can be inferred about the earlier function and particular development of that material on its journey between the Jesus of the gospels and the gospels about Jesus. For instance, a poetic piece of worship material (such as those found in the first two chapters of Luke and in John 1:1-18) probably reflects early Christian worship material and the settings where it may have come together. Likewise, if you have a collection of seven woes against Jewish leaders in Matthew, or collections of sayings on how to organize the church in Matthew 16-18 and John 13-17, these clusters probably reflect something of the organizational function of the material before it was finalized in the narrative. Conversely, clumpings of parables around agricultural themes, or fitting all the Jerusalem events at the end of gospel narratives in the Synoptics (contra John) indeed reflects the narratorial organizing and use of material by the evangelist. The listing of Scripture-fulfillment passages may reflect both tradition and the work of the evangelists, as early Christianity's gathering of scriptural connections with Jesus' Messiahship became organized within the narrative by each of the gospel writers.

d) *Historical Context and Rhetorical Analysis.* While the histories of the gospel writers cannot finally be known, several things can be

discerned about the contexts in which their material was finalized, and this opens several kinds of insight into their crafting and presentation of their accounts of Jesus. For instance, Mark and John both include Aramaisms, words of Jesus in Aramaic, which are then “translated” for presumably Greek-speaking audiences. This seems like a bridge between recollections of the teachings of the historical Jesus in Aramaic and the needs of later audiences. Likewise, if we understand Luke’s interest in portraying Jesus as a just and righteous man falsely condemned at the hands of the Romans, the character of his account written for “Theophilus” helps us understand some of the editorial choices he makes in his selection of material. Both John and Matthew emerge within Jewish communities, and they are especially interested in convincing their audiences that Jesus is indeed the Jewish Messiah. This affects their presentations of Jesus’ teachings, his miracles, and his fulfillment of Scripture. John’s crafting has more of an inclination toward Hellenistic members of the audience, and the teachings of Jesus have become rendered in a Johannine paraphrase.²⁶ Nonetheless, many Jesus-tradition-type nuggets of speech are present even within John’s longer discourses, and there are many ways in which John’s tradition seems even preferable to the Synoptics. The Q tradition had its own provenance, but it is likely to have been reflective of a particular set of concerns, including a wisdom orientation and interests as to what is required of discipleship.

e) *Canon and Authority.* While former eras of the church have emphasized particular aspects of biblical authority such as church teaching, credalism, or historical reconstructions, recent moves among scholars have simply reaffirmed the canonical authority of the gospels in and of itself. The New Testament documents were selected over three hundred years by the early church because they experienced God speaking through them, and this remains the most effective validation of the Scriptures in later generations as well. Granted, such other factors as a piece of writing being connected to the apostles or their followers, or representing an understanding of Jesus compatible with what Jesus was thought to have said and done, were also factors in the canonization process. From the middle of the second century, however, the four gospels were grouped together, and they have been considered authoritative and normative by Christians ever since. Parts of the gospels may indeed be considered “true” existentially, even if not historically. The question is “how” a particular passage is to be understood as true. Given the many dif-

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ferences between the gospels, for instance, rather than labor over whether there were four Beatitudes (Luke) or nine (Matthew), or whether the Temple was cleansed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (John) or at the end (the Synoptics), each rendering has its own point to make and is authoritative as canonical narrative. Therefore, gradients of historicity need not displace the authority of the rest of the canonical corpus. They may help us interpret the material better and will certainly produce new insights, but the rest of the gospels still speak with inspiring power and canonical authority. The inspired and inspiring power of the gospels will always be their truest measure of weight.

CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING HISTORICITY

How have scholars distinguished the historical from other material? It will surprise no one that the size and type of fish one catches will be determined by the sort of net one uses and where one does the fishing. This is true with every discipline; the quality of the selection will be determined by the quality of the process and methodologies used to make the selections. In that sense, applying modern historicity grids over first-century Jewish/Christian faith documents is from the start a clash of categories because it imposes a modernist grid over an ancient set of texts. How do you analyze effectively the biology of a fossil, or the intellectual properties of love, let alone the verifiability of a past and distant event? When lawyers cross-examine a witness, contravening testimony by another witness, or hard evidence that challenges one's testimony, is necessary to challenge its historicity. In the case of Jesus, however, all we have is the testimonies of the gospels, a variety of Jesus sayings in the New Testament letters, some extracanonical material such as the Gospel of Thomas, and a mention or two by Josephus. None of these, however, provides an alternative history of the Jesus of Nazareth against which to make contrastive judgments. Further, when a passage by Josephus comes across as representing Jesus in a positive light, "historical" scholars claim (against all textual evidence to the contrary) that this "must have been" an insertion by Christians! The methodology of "historians" is thus clearly deconstructive, and scholars face the pain of being shamed within the guild if they do not bow down to the prevalent critical orthodoxy. What we are left with primarily is the four canonical

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gospels and our judgments about what to do with the portraits of Jesus they offer.

Despite the fact that the Jesus Seminar has numbered the Gospel of Thomas with the other four, this move is problematic on several levels. First, Thomas is not a gospel like the four canonical ones are; it is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. It may be like the lost source, Q, as it is in the genre of a sayings collection, not a gospel narrative. Second, while Thomas does have many sayings that sound like what we think Jesus might have said, most of its sayings are so extensively laced with gnostic nuance that the tradition cannot be held to be very close at all to what the historical Jesus might have taught. It is far more gnostic, for instance, than John, and yet John gets easily passed over by the same scholars. Third, there were good reasons early Christians chose not to include Thomas among the authorized gospels. Perhaps it was the esoteric tone of this secret-sayings collection, or such problematic things as the passages where Jesus calls for women to become male in order to be saved, which caused the early church to never consider it seriously within the canonized corpus. For modern scholars to second-guess early Christian judgments on the matter seems ostentatious at the very least. Especially for those claiming to err on the side of restraint! Nonetheless, considering some of the criteria scholars use for determining historicity may help us understand the choices being made.

a) *The Criterion of Dissimilarity.* This criterion assumes that which is most dissimilar to later Christian practices and beliefs stands a greater chance of being authentic. For instance, if it is known that Christians in the middle part of the first century came to refer to Jesus as “Lord” and “Christ,” uses of these titles of Jesus in the gospels more likely reflect traditional presentations of Jesus rather than earliest material. Likewise, the fact that church organization passages are primarily in Matthew 16 and not in Mark helps one appreciate the function of such presentations as helping Christians in Matthew’s situation develop functional organization models rather than seeing Jesus as instituting structures of governance when he otherwise seems charismatic — fluent and Spirit based — in his approach to corporate matters. Likewise, it seems odd that a Jesus who challenged Jewish institutions in the name of God would have erected “good Christian rites” in their place. Rather, these most likely represent developments among Jesus’ followers, and the comment in John 4:2 that Jesus did not baptize, only his disciples did, seems

historically accurate. It is especially plausible as a historical aside because it goes against the grain of later developments moving toward structuralization within the early church. Likewise, Jesus' dining with "sinners" and cleansing the Temple are unlikely to have been made up, and neither are John's favorable presentations of women.

The use of this tool is valid in several ways. The historicity of these sorts of events is indeed bolstered precisely because they are not the sort of things likely to have been concocted by later Christians. They are dissimilar from what would have been predictable within the later Jesus movement. On the other hand, this tool is also problematic. Maybe Jesus did indeed influence the movement, and maybe later developments emerged *because* Jesus' followers got it right. Much authentic material is thus rejected by this tool. Another problem lies with the skewed image resulting from such a method, even if it were accurate. Put otherwise, if the things about Jesus' ministry that were strikingly dissimilar from emerging Christianity were the only building material used to construct our understanding of Jesus, would such a portrait be representative? Probably not! As a tool, it must be used gingerly and alongside others.

b) *Multiple Attestation*. This criterion affirms that the material attested in more sources, especially distinctively, is more likely to be authentic. There is good reason for this methodology in that the multiplicity of witnesses tends to affirm the incidence of an account. For instance, all four gospels portray Jesus' ministry as beginning with his baptism by John, preaching and healing, and evoking controversy among the Jewish leaders. Then, the passion narratives all include Jesus' entering Jerusalem triumphantly, having a last meal with his disciples, being arrested in the garden and tried before two councils (a Jewish and a Roman trial), his sentencing, death, resurrection, and appearances to his disciples. Likewise, his teaching was probably about the Kingdom of God, and he probably taught in parables crafted within terse, pithy sayings.

On the positive end of this criterion's use, the fact that several sources report a common event or saying may indeed suggest its reliability. This is not to say, however, that something mentioned only once or twice is ahistorical. This tool simply includes events and sayings appearing to be corroborated by multiple attestation. Then again, multiplicity may simply suggest popularity, or even mutual dependence, so it is not a watertight method either. Rudolf

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Schnackenburg's recent book (1996) describes many ways in which the portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels do indeed cohere, and his masterful work may reflect some movement toward a greater appreciation of the gospels' historicity.

c) *Naturalism versus Supernaturalism.* A third method for determining historicity is to marginalize reports of supernaturalism as ahistorical. This is an understandable approach, especially in the modern era, where wonders and sensational outcomes are best explained by the "historian" in rational, cause-and-effect terms. This is probably the most controversial of the tools used, largely because of the negativistic stance it assumes regarding how God works in the world, whether through the ministry of Jesus or otherwise. Historical scholars therefore try to solve the "problem" of Jesus' miracles by posing natural explanations for miracles (the sea calmed down, and his disciples associated it with Jesus' appearance on the lakeside; Jesus spoke forgiveness to people and they were delivered from psychosomatic illnesses, etc.) or by inferring alternative origins of the material (Jesus is cast into the mold of Jewish or Hellenistic typologies). Certainly the gospel writers constructed narrative bridges between the parts of the story they had available to them, so some of this may indeed reflect a part of the narrative construction.

On the positive side of this method, historiography works best this way. When analyzing religious movements and their histories, a fair amount of skepticism is helpful in distinguishing events from their later presentations. Likewise, other ancient examples, such as Apollonius of Tyana (a Jewish miracle worker from the first century CE) suggest heroes were often embellished with miraculous reports as part of the rhetoric of making their claims known. However, when it comes to Jesus, he probably did heal and exorcise, and I would not be surprised to learn that people did encounter something of the divine Presence as they talked and interacted with him.²⁷ Such phenomena are not uncommon at all among spiritually gifted leaders. Of course, one's approach to this issue rests upon a faith question: was Jesus the Son of God, or not? Either answer is an answer of faith, and this inclination affects the way one regards and uses this particular tool.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, conversing with me at Yale last year, commented that most leading philosophers would be unlikely to make absolutist statements about what "cannot" have happened. In this respect, the historical-critical method used by Bible scholars is more

dogmatic in its negativism than most philosophers — even non-religious ones — would be, themselves. It therefore has ceased to be a neutral means of measure and has become a means of selection according to one's biases. These sorts of things are important to keep in mind in assessing how we deal with “the wondrous,” especially as we enter the post-modern era.

d) *Coherence*. This criterion identifies those deeds and words most coherent with the picture of Jesus we assume to be true as reliable, and its application marginalizes the rest. For example, scenes from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas where boy Jesus is presented as making pigeons out of clay, clapping his hands and watching them fly away, do not mesh with our impression of his reasons for doing miracles. Likewise, his cursing people who upset him, and their subsequently being smitten with illness or death, does not seem like the sort of Jesus we find in the canonical gospels. In that sense, the overall portrait of Jesus serves as a helpful general guide.

Then again, this tool is terribly circular. How do we know precisely, or even generally, what Jesus was like? The four gospels provide the fullest database for what we believe to have been the case, so how do we know those four gospels are the best resources for understanding who Jesus was? Our “coherent” impression of what he must have been like (derived *from* the gospels) provides a template! Of course, elements drawn from the other criteria help to form one's bare-minimum impression of what Jesus must have been like, and these aspects find connections with extracanonical material, thereby furthering the investigation. One of the great challenges of Jesus research is thus to keep *our* ideas of what Jesus should have been like from becoming the organizing pattern for determining what he therefore must have been like. The historical Jesus may indeed be experienced as a stranger to us so familiar with our faith-related portraits, as Schweitzer asserted. On the other hand, a portrait is not wrong just because it is traditional. Sometimes traditions get it right, and distinguishing original images from subsequent ones must take this fact into consideration as well.

e) *Plausibility*. The criterion of plausibility is more open than more abrupt possible/impossible approaches of rationalistic modernism. It builds on sociological and religious knowledge of the times and seeks to understand Jesus within the context of his day, interpreting actions and teachings in the light of first-century movements. Drawing upon the history-of-religions findings of recent archaeolog-

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ical discoveries, and at times applying social-sciences methodologies to the gospel narratives, fresh approaches to historicity are being explored that open up possibilities instead of narrowing them. Plausibility is an intentionally general rubric, and it has the advantage of being able to assess degrees of certainty — complete with rationale for the judgment's qualification — rather than approaching matters on either/or grounds.

The advantage of this more open approach is that the sorts of categories deemed off limits in other approaches find new possibility in the light of fresh consideration. A huge difference, for instance, between present Jesus scholarship and the rationalistic approaches of the nineteenth century is that even liberal scholars nowadays are willing to see Jesus as a healer, an exorcist, a proclaimer of God's sovereign reign, and a charismatic holy person. This marks a bit of erosion of naturalistic certainty, at least in its more wooden expressions.

Likewise, the political implications of Jesus' work are more keenly understood in the light of other first-century Jewish prophets. Jesus was not alone in his day, and the more we learn about the socio-religious situation of first-century Palestine, the better our guesses about the historical ministry of Jesus become. Limitations, of course, will orbit around such qualitative issues as the particular methodologies and their uses, as well as the outcome of the process. Ironically, one of the overarching circularities of the endeavor is that whatever one's portrayal of Jesus will be, its functional merit will be ordered by aesthetic, religious, moral, and evocative aspects of the representation. In that sense, one of the unnamed-yet-influential measures of historical-Jesus research is the test of interpretive viability: does it make sense to us in a way that is compelling and evocative of meaningful assimilation?

THE "GOAL" OF JESUS

Within these parameters, taking up the challenge of Reimarus and seeking to know what we can of Jesus' "goal" still yields some beneficial results. Using the criteria of dissimilarity, coherence, and multiple attestation, this earlier interest can still be explored profitably. Following the contribution of John Riches Jesus' contribution to the transformation of Judaism — not away from itself, but restoring its central vocation — seems a profitable way to proceed. It is highly

unlikely that Jesus challenged Jewish religion to set up a supersessionistic religion with its own laws and structures. No. It is best to view Jesus as challenging, in the name of God, the inadequacy of creaturely activity to suffice with regard to the human/divine relationship and what God expects of humanity. In that sense, Jesus may be seen as challenging not only the Judaism of his day, but also the Christianities of later generations, as well as religious scaffolding of every time and place. Religious and political platforms may be of some value, but they can never actualize fully the human/divine relationship which has always been, and will ever be, a matter of faith. We see this sort of a challenge emerging in several ways upon considering several basic planks in the platforms of our understandings of the historical Jesus.

a) “*Abba-Father*” — *a new relationship with God*. Using the criterion of dissimilarity, Joachim Jeremias²⁸ argued several years ago that Jesus’ reference to God as “abba” was highly significant. According to Jeremias, Jesus’ use of the diminutive term of parent for God (the equivalent of “Daddy”) marks the first occurrence in the history of ancient religions that the Deity was referred to in the intimate and personal sense. If this were indeed the case, it is unlikely to have been made up. It is also found within several different traditions, and from a religious and theological perspective this detail is highly significant and evocative. Jesus came to show humanity something about the human/divine relationship whereby God invites us to become the children of God, and wherein we are given the “spirit of adoption” whereby we cry out, “Abba, Father” after the pattern set by Jesus (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5-7).

While some scholars have taken issue with Jeremias regarding the degree of innovation represented here, nonetheless, the fact that Matthew and Luke omit the term suggests its earliness and it makes it difficult to imagine the term’s fabrication. It may indeed represent Jesus’ *ipsissima vox*, or the very voice of Jesus, even if the words themselves have come to be expressed otherwise. The most significant issue here, however, is not the term’s historicity, but its theological implications. Viewing Jesus’ mission as seeking to bring about a new relationship between God and humanity — one not based on fear and distance, but based on intimacy and love — lends valuable insight into the character of the Gospel. It entails the good news that humans are loved by God, and that we are invited into a new relationship with the deity characterized by the intimacy of a

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parent/child relationship. God has been and is on the move, seeking to establish such relationships with humanity, and even the Gospel of John presents this as the center of Jesus' mission (1:11-13; 3:16-21; 4:21-24).

b) *Jesus' cleansing of the Temple*. The Temple cleansing meets all the criteria mentioned above. It is not likely to have been made up, as it strikes against pietistic inclinations, and while it is mentioned in all four gospels (Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; Matthew 21:10-17) it is narrated at the beginning of Jesus' ministry according to John, instead of at the end (John 2:13-17). Here historicity is less of an issue than the question of purpose: *why* did Jesus do it? Certainly, it is within the Jewish prophetic tradition as a demonstrative sign against corrupt institutions, but what particular purpose might such an action suggest?

Here the work of historical scholars yields great interpretive rewards. The issue Jesus was confronting had less to do with whether the youth group should be having a bake sale at the meeting house, and more to do with the creation of religious insiders and outsiders by religious systems regarding acceptability before God and narrowed means of its attainment. Two especially profitable interpretations have been put forward by recent scholars on this matter: first, Jesus was standing with the poor and the economically marginalized in performing this corrective action. The poor could not afford to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Sacrificial animals were not allowed to be raised in the wild, or even domestically, but had to be purchased from those who had raised them as proper and unblemished offerings. As a means of motivating people to employ the religious system effectively, those who did not offer proper sacrifices were thereby deemed "sinners," excluded from grace, unless they exchanged their Roman currency (unacceptable to God, of course) for Jewish shekels (at a considerably high exchange rate!) in order to purchase a proper sacrificial animal. The result was that the poor of the land were effectively exempted from ritual participation in the religious community of Israel and were thus marginalized beyond the pale of social acceptability. Jesus sought to turn this around, and his prophetic action in the Temple declared God's inclusive love extends especially to the needy, and that religious institutions which do the work of God should be organized as houses of prayer and worship "for all nations" rather than serving the interests of the organizers.

A second interpretation employs the work of such religious anthropologists as Mary Douglas, and it deals with the theological implications of systems designed for the attainment of religious purity. In the religious sense, God's grace is not delimited to outward means of attaining ritual purity; rather, it is received by faith alone. Here the religious authorities and systems had defined righteousness by external means of attaining it, and Jesus' prophetic demonstration in the Temple would have reflected a rejection — in the name of God — of such systems. In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus can here be seen to be challenging the tendency of religious societies to resort to external measures of acceptability rather than getting at the heart of the Law. In that sense, this action accords with the manner of Jesus' teaching, regardless of the content. Where the religious leaders of his day put emphasis on the external measure of pleasing God, Jesus appealed radically to the center.

c) *Jesus dined with tax gatherers and "sinners."* Another aspect of Jesus' ministry unlikely to have been concocted, and yet finding itself represented in multiple kinds of ways, is the provocative action of initiating table fellowship with tax gatherers and "sinners." Again, the issue here is not what people had done or not done in order to become numbered among the impure, but a confrontation of socio-religious systems for determining insiders and outsiders on the basis of religious purity codes. Such an action might not seem as provocative to us today as it would have been for a Palestinian first-century audience. Within Jewish culture, however, table fellowship carried sacramental associations (Psalm 23; Leviticus 3; 7:11-34). Communion sacrifices could be offered on behalf of estranged friends and neighbors, and as the food was consumed together, having thanked God for the meal, God's presence was experienced as a sacred, reconciling reality. This is why Jews were not allowed to eat with Gentiles or to enter their homes. To enjoy hospitality and table fellowship was to be reconciled before the presence of God, and without fulfilling the covenants with Abraham and Moses, this was held to be impossible.

Assessing why Jesus ate with tax gatherers and "sinners" openly (Mark 2:13-17) then becomes clear. It was an enacted statement of God's grace, available to humanity (even before they repented!) calling for acceptance of the unacceptable: that we are accepted by God unconditionally. This of course was an affront to the Scribes and Pharisees, and their reaction was understandable: "Behold, a glutton

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and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). This also explains some of the backdrop between the passages that emphasize Jesus’ coming to seek “the lost” and to restore the “lost sheep” of Israel (Luke 15). Likewise, the parable of the Messianic Banquet stands as an eschatological statement as to the eternal fellowship of those who respond to the saving initiative of God. Put otherwise, Jesus came to reveal the saving love of God, which is rooted in God’s saving initiative versus human attempts to attain it through creaturely activity or ritual means of purity (Luke 14:15-24). Jesus reaches out to Samaritans, women, the sick, and the “unclean” as an ambassador of God’s love, and the Gospel ever challenges the world and its scaffolding in the name of God’s redemptive work.

d) *Jesus proclaims and furthers the Kingdom of God.* A notion that is also rather uncontroversial is that Jesus came proclaiming the active reign (kingdom) of God, and that he did so by means of his preaching, his teaching, and his miracles. The fact that John has no parables, no exorcisms, and no direct teachings on the kingdom (other than a couple of contrastive statements in John 3 and 18) is one of the reasons scholars question John’s historicity. In the Synoptics, Jesus comes declaring: “The reign of God is Here! Repent and believe in the Gospel.” Accompanying this proclamation are the delivering deeds of Jesus, whereby he casts out demons, heals the sick, feeds multitudes, and forgives sins. This “kingdom” transcends earthly boundaries and outward structures, and its locus is within people’s hearts and among them. The active leadership of God is heralded as a dynamic reality to be engaged spiritually, and it is at work powerfully yet subtly in the world.

Jesus’ parables develop various aspects of the heavenly reign of God by means of commonplace imagery. Such an approach not only proves itself a marked contrast to the authority appeals of Pharisaic leaders, but also to militaristic understandings of Messiahship so common to first-century Palestine.²⁹ While the Zealot movement did not come into full bloom until the 50s, Jesus is seen as distancing himself time and again from nationalistic and militaristic understandings of Messiahship — even among the Twelve. Some of Reimarus’ points are well taken here, and yet, to impose a nationalistic portrait over the Jesus of the Gospels goes against the unanimous portrayal of Jesus throughout the history of the early church. The Jesus of the gospels is presented as challenging the legitimacy and place of Roman

domination, and the “government” he espouses transcends earthly bounds and structures. The inability to imagine Jesus’ non-violent assault on domination-oriented worldly structures of power in the name of God’s domination-free order may say more about the limited imagination of the scholar doing the research than what actually was taking place within the mission of the Jesus of history.³⁰ The way of Jesus still confounds the wise and challenges our conventional sensibilities. Again, Albert Schweitzer reminded us nearly a century ago to beware if our portrait of Jesus seems overly familiar. The reason God’s revelation through what Jesus said and did has been needed may be due to our inability to grasp on our own the hidden ways God works in the world and in our lives.

REFLECTIONS

What does all this mean? One of the things most impressive about the recent attention upon Jesus is precisely that: Jesus has received a huge amount of attention, and whether one agrees with particular interpretations, the discussions themselves create ongoing waves of interest. This interest is especially timely as America has been described as entering the “post-Christian” era. Or, has it really? The interest itself may suggest the permeability of such an assessment, and our culture may not be as post Christian or irreligious as we have been told. Jesus continues to be of interest to liberals and conservatives, Christians and non-Christians, the religious and the non-religious. With the new methodologies and fresh presentations of Jesus, interest is sure to expand, not despite the controversies, but because of them.

Ironically, the new approaches to Jesus, as well as opening new vistas on what Jesus may have been like, also open up possibilities that had otherwise been closed off within the modernist, rationalistic era. For instance, recent attempts to locate the portraiture of Jesus within the Q and Thomas traditions may lead scholars to reconsider some of the material we had deemed out of bounds for historical-critical investigation. The Gospel of John, for instance, is far more real a source than hypothetical Q. Likewise, John’s spiritualization of Jesus material at once becomes far less problematic when compared with the gnostic presentation of Jesus in Thomas, so that the more weight that is put on more speculative sources, the greater the rationale for taking a new look at possibly overlooked Jesus material in the Gospel of John, the other gospels, and even the writings of Paul.³¹ Also,

whenever a new portrait becomes the new thesis, to be hammered on and subjected to antithetical scrutiny, its longevity is by no means ensured. It simply leads to the next phase of discussions whereby antitheses challenge theses, and worthy arguments become distinguished from the rest. In that sense, rather than viewing the latest portraits as definitive new images, it may be more accurate to see them as not only opening doors to the future, but also to the best of the past.

Advances, nonetheless, are being made, and helpfully so. Jesus is no longer to be seen as superseding the religion of Judaism, but as a radical transformer of it — seeking to restore it to its truest core. Likewise, Jesus may be seen as a reformer of other religious expressions as well, including Christianity, rather than a single-religion founder. The great thing about this insight is that the historical Jesus, as well as the risen Christ, is understood rightly to be a challenger of the status quo even when it bears the name Christian, and Quakers have long held to this prophetic understanding of Jesus as the Christ. Revealed by Jesus is a God whose access is mediated not by creaturely activity, nor by structured formulas, nor by hierarchical organizations, but by the human response of faith to God's love and saving initiative. Further, religious and societal relegation of people to categories of "insiders and outsiders" does not represent the way God views people. God looks on the heart, and to believe in God fully is to receive God fully. Jesus also represents a God who cares for the poor, the dispossessed, and the needy, which bears ramifications for ways we ought to order our concerns. We also see a Jesus whose concerns extend far beyond religiosity and whose relevance becomes compelling for later generations. As well as seeing Jesus as coming to provide for the eternal destiny of humanity, we also see a Jesus who is involved in actualizing the reign of God in the here and now — calling us into partnership with him in the establishment of God's present reign here on earth.

Such a focus connects the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith, rather than driving a wedge between them. Friends have always had an interest in the present leadership of the risen Christ, and just as this is the dynamic center of authentic Christianity, such a view is bolstered by some of the recent portraits of Jesus. To believe God is at work spiritually in the world, leading people into truth by means of the Present Christ, is to find oneself in harmony with the shared perspective of all the New Testament writers, especially the writers of the

gospels and Apostle Paul. Likewise, George Fox declared the conviction that Christ is come to teach his people himself, and just as such a view affected the first-century crafting of Jesus memories, our interpretations of those memories evoke new histories in the present.³²

In a final circularity, one's sense of the historical begets its own history. What one understands the historical Jesus to have said and done invariably sets the pattern for what we think we too should aspire to do and become. For Albert Schweitzer, his understanding of Jesus as a healer and a servant of the disenfranchised led him to become a medical doctor in Africa. The Incarnation thus begets further incarnations; perhaps even further leadings. When this happens for each of us, Schweitzer's prediction at the end of his book also comes true, for the nexus, the catalyzing intersection of connecting the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith, is the changed and changing lives of those seeking to attend, discern, and heed the present leadings of the risen Christ for today. In that sense, researching the historical Jesus cannot be conducted effectively unless one is open to engaging personally the subject of the search: Jesus. Therefore, let the seeker of the historical Jesus beware! The truest form of knowing may indeed imply coming to know experimentally.³³ As Albert Schweitzer (1910:403) says in the last paragraph of his book,

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

NOTES

1. See also this conviction put forward by Luke Timothy Johnson (1999) and Marcus Borg (1994), leading scholars who have been on opposing sides of recent Jesus debates. The best one-volume dialogue on the subject is the book by Borg and Wright (1998).
2. This was the view of H. E. G. Paulus, in his 1828 book, *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Heidelberg). Today, few respectable scholars hold that view, although the assumption explains why so many have tried to offer religious and mythological explanations for how the stories of Jesus may have emerged.

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3. This is the approach taken by Gerald Downing (1988), Dominic Crossan (1989, 1991), and Burton Mack (1993), for instance. They understand Jesus as a Jewish preacher within the Hellenistic Cynic tradition.
4. Ben Witherington holds this view (1990, 1994, 1995), as do several other scholars, including Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1987, 1994), who constructs an image of Jesus from the perspective of feminist Sophia ideology.
5. This is Marcus Borg's view (1987), and Stevan Davies (1995) identifies Jesus as an exorcist who goes into trances and casts demons out of the afflicted. See also Graham Twelftree's book (1993).
6. Geza Vermes developed an image of Jesus as a charismatic Jew (1973, 1983, 1993), and Martin Hengel views Jesus as a charismatic leader (1968).
7. Of course, a huge amount of disagreement among scholars exists regarding what is meant by a "Jewish Prophet." See Richard Horsley, who sees Jesus as a social prophet (1984), and see Bart Ehrman (1999), who sees Jesus within the trajectory of apocalyptic prophetic traditions.
8. See Blomberg's treatment of this issue (1987).
9. See, for instance, Markus Brockmuehl's book (1994), an excellent introduction to Jesus' ministry, claiming Jesus did not fail, but that he accomplished what he came to do, even in the laying down of his life. Marinus de Jonge's text (1991) is also an excellent one, written by a seasoned scholar who is also sensitive to matters of interpretation. The book by Gary Habermas (1984) offers evidence in favor of the presentations of Jesus in the gospels, and the book by Philip Yancey (1995) poses some very readable insights into aspects of grace conveyed through the actions and teachings of Jesus.
10. The German title of Schweitzer's book (1906) was "from Reimarus to Wrede," and other scholars have also acknowledged Lessing's publishing of his work as something of a turning point.
11. Schleiermacher was the first theologian to lecture on the historical Jesus in 1819, although his 1832 lectures were not published until 1864. Strauss wrote and rewrote his "Life of Jesus" (1835/6; 1864), and he employed the category of mythology to help explain the presence of supra-naturalistic content in the gospels. Reactions against Strauss were many.
12. Heinrich Julius Holtzmann's book, *Die synoptischen Evangelien* (Leipzig, 1863), developed the Marcan hypothesis (that Matthew and Luke used Mark in constructing their gospels) and used Mark as the backbone of his Jesus history. Ernst Renan's *Life of Jesus* (New York: Random House, 1972, originally 1863) sought to produce a less rationalistic and a more personal and artistic presentation of Jesus.
13. This term was used by Klooster (1977:29), but it overstates the picture.
14. See, for instance, the work of Major, Manson, and Wright (1938) as well as many others.
15. Cadbury's most significant book, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, has just been published again by Hendriksons (1999, originally 1927). He introduced the German work in form criticism to English speaking audiences in his essay, "Between Jesus and the Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923) 81-92, and in many essays hence.
16. His commentary on John is probably the most provocative work on John ever written, and his form-history approach can also be seen in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Within John, however, none of his evidence stacks up, even when assessed on its own terms (Anderson, 1997:70-166), so despite its appeal to scientific methodology, other approaches must be explored.

ON JESUS: QUESTS FOR HISTORICITY • 33

17. James Robinson's book, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*, crystallized the interest, and the Jesus studies being produced today reflect that renewed interest.
18. While Wright names this movement in print in 1992, I remember him discussing it with several of his colleagues as early as 1986.
19. Cadbury's book on the manner of operation used by Jesus, rather than the content of his teaching, is very insightful (1947).
20. Borg lists three books by Crossan, the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels*, and his own work, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, as books listed on the *Publishers Weekly* top ten best-seller's list at one time or another (1997:2, n.2).
21. See Powell's treatment of the Jesus Seminar and critiques of it (1998:65-81). See also full-length critiques by Boyd (1995), Wilkins and Moreland (1995), and Witherington (1995).
22. Mark Powell's tabulation (1998:67) accords to Mark 1 red saying and 18 pink sayings, to John 0 red sayings and 1 pink saying, and to Thomas 3 red sayings and 40 pink sayings. Reflected here is the opinion that the Q tradition (and material like it) is primitive.
23. Most notable is Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Real Jesus* (1996), which takes on directly the publicity-oriented work of the Jesus Seminar as well as its claims.
24. Burton Mack's claims that this represents the earliest material giving us a completely different picture of Jesus, however, appear overstated.
25. According to Papias, a second-century church leader, at least some of Mark's material was drawn from Peter's preaching, which Papias says has been adapted to address the needs of the church. He also makes the claim that Mark got it down correctly, but not in the right order — an interesting statement to make for one affirming the authority of the four canonical gospels!
26. See Franz Müssner's largely overlooked work here (1966).
27. If Marcus Borg and others are indeed correct in seeing Jesus in the tradition of holy persons, the view that high-christological material is later rather than earlier may be reversed. This is certainly my view, and I believe there is good reason for tracing some of John's high-christology tradition back to encounters with Jesus (1997:137-193).
28. See especially his *New Testament Theology* (1971:36f., 61-68, 178-203), where he connects the findings of historical investigations with meaningful theological implications.
29. See, for instance, Martin Hengel's refutation of Brandon's thesis, that Jesus was a brigand (1974, 1977). This was one issue I had to address, for instance, in writing a treatment on Jesus and peace (Anderson, 1994). What seems striking to me is how different Jesus was from the Galilean prophets of the first century; he is portrayed as eschewing popularistic and nationalistic associations in the name of something more transcendent and powerful.
30. See Walter Wink's ground-breaking study (1992) on "Jesus' third way."
31. See, for instance, John Robinson's book (1984), which argued for the primacy of the Johannine tradition. Also, there are over 100 sayings attributed to "the Lord" (or sounding like Jesus) in Paul's letters, and some of these are not found in the gospels.
32. Woops, I'd better watch it! My portrait of Jesus is getting to seem a lot like my Quaker investments; then again, maybe some of the Quaker views of Jesus have indeed distilled some valid insights into what Jesus may have really been up to. Many of these are indeed corroborated by recent research.
33. Or, experientially.