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Resources on the Historical Study of Jesus

Dennis Ingolfsland
Crown College

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Today Jesus’ existence is acknowledged even by scholars who are otherwise highly skeptical.

Jesus of Nazareth has been the center of significant media attention in recent years. Even before Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ,” Jesus had been the focus of feature articles in Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report. Jesus was also the subject of television documentaries by PBS, A&E, TLC, the History Channel, the Discovery Channel and even a full length prime time special by ABC News.

Most presentations focus on Jesus as a man of history. In fact, the last 20 years have been part of what scholars are now calling the “Third Quest for the historical Jesus,” which is generally characterized by serious attempts to understand Jesus of Nazareth in the historical context of first century Palestine. This essay will highlight some of these historical studies beginning with an introduction to the various “Quests” for Jesus, but focusing primarily on the “Third Quest” which began in the mid-1980’s and continues unabated even today.

Introduction

Many scholars believe the quest for Jesus as a person of history began in 1778 when the papers of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) were published posthumously. The European world of Reimarus was one in which the reliability of the Gospels were widely accepted. The tide was turning, however, and scholars were becoming increasingly skeptical of the supernatural. Reimarus believed that Jesus could be understood without appealing to the supernatural. He argued that Jesus was not the Son of God sent to save people from their sins, but a political revolutionary whose message had to do with deliverance from Roman oppression. After Jesus was executed his disciples stole Jesus’ body and proclaimed that he had risen from the dead to avoid going back to the hard work of fishing.

Like Reimarus, David Frederick Strauss (1808-1874) also rejected the traditional understanding of Jesus but offered a different solution. In his Life of Jesus Critically Examined Strauss proposed that the Gospels were myth and suggested that it was important to get behind the mythological form of the Gospel stories to the truth these stories symbolized. Although Strauss’ idea continues to influence some scholars even today, most would deny that the Gospels fit the genre of myth. For example, after an extensive study, summarized in What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography, Richard Burridge concludes that the Gospels compare favorably with the ancient genre of bio or biography.

In contrast to those like Reimarus and Strauss who believed the Gospels had at least some historical value, Bruno Bauer (1809-1882), author of Christ and the Caesars, held that the Gospels were literary fictions and that Jesus did not even exist. Few in Bauer’s day were convinced by his arguments and today Jesus’ existence is acknowledged even by scholars who are otherwise highly skeptical. After analyzing both the biblical and non-biblical evidence, The Historical Jesus by Gary Habermas and Jesus Outside the New Testament by Robert Van Voorst conclude that the evidence for Jesus’ existence is overwhelming.

One of the most influential works on Jesus has been The Messianic Secret by William Wrede (1859-1906). Wrede, who was highly skeptical of the historical reliability of the Gospels, insisted that Jesus did not consider himself to be a messiah; rather, it was the early church that developed this idea about him. Following Wrede, most critical Jesus scholars began to see their task as separating the core of gospel material that went back to Jesus from the “encrusted tradition” that had been created by the early church. As seen below, Wrede’s thinking proved to be strongly influential even among scholars who did not adopt his degree of skepticism.
In 1906 Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) dropped a bombshell on the world of critical Jesus scholarship with the publication of his book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus. In this book Schweitzer critiqued the works of Reimarus, Strauss, Bauer, Wrede and others and concluded that they had ultimately “discovered” a Jesus they had set out to find, often one made in their own image. Contrary to Wrede, Schweitzer argued that Jesus did indeed believe God had called him to be the Messiah, but that Jesus died in despair when he failed to bring in the kingdom.

Schweitzer and Wrede became pivotal in Jesus studies. According to noted Jesus scholar, N.T. Wright, most twentieth century scholars generally followed one of two roads, either the “Wredeban” or the “Schweitzerban.” In other words, they either followed the radical skepticism of William Wrede, or they followed Albert Schweitzer’s view of Jesus as an “eschatological prophet.” An eschatological, or “end times” prophet was one who proclaimed that God was going to act in history in powerful and dramatic ways to bring about his kingdom; a common belief in first century Judaism.

The “quest” for Jesus from Reimarus to Wrede eventually became known as the “Old Quest for the Historical Jesus” after the title of Schweitzer’s book. Schweitzer’s arguments were so convincing that the “Old Quest” came to an end, leading to the famous statement by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) in Jesus and the Word, that “we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus”. Bultmann’s radical skepticism ushered in what some scholars came to call the period of “no quest” when many scholars gave up the historical quest for Jesus.

This “no quest” period, however, did not last long because some of Bultmann’s own students thought he was a bit too skeptical. Ernst Kasemann is often credited with resuscitating the quest with a paper entitled “The Problem of the Historical Jesus” (1953), but the “New Quest” actually got its name from the book A New Quest for the Historical Jesus published in 1959 by J.M. Robinson. Scholars of the New Quest generally focused on Jesus as a teacher of timeless truths. While many of the books that characterized the First and Second Quests are now out of print, selections from the works of Reimarus, Strauss, Wrede, Schweitzer, Bultmann, Kasemann and others have been conveniently reprinted in The Historical Jesus Quest, edited by Gregory W. Dawes.

The Third Quest for the historical Jesus began in the mid-1980’s and is generally characterized by serious scholarly attempts to study Jesus of Nazareth against the historical background of first century Palestine. While the term, “Third Quest” is often used of virtually all serious historical studies of Jesus written since the mid-1980’s, some scholars make a distinction between the general skepticism of Third Quest scholarship as a whole (what N.T. Wright calls, the “Schweitzerban”) and the more radical skepticism of a relatively smaller group who continue to be more philosophically aligned to the Second Quest. Wright calls this latter group the “Renewed Quest” or the “Wredeban.” For the purposes of organization, this essay will divide modern Jesus scholars into these two camps, and from this point on, will use the phrase “Third Quest” in the more restricted sense, distinguishing between Third Quest and Renewed Quest.

The Renewed Quest or “Wredeban”

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza is one of the more skeptical Jesus scholars. In her books, In Memory of Her and Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet, Schussler Fiorenza adopts a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in which the gospel writers are assumed to have covered up the contributions of women. She makes it clear that her work is not one of detached objectivity but rather involves bringing ideas about Jesus more in line with a “critical feminist theology of liberation”. Schussler Fiorenza argues that in ancient times, “Wisdom” or “Sophia” was often personified as mediator of creation, the divine savior, and was sometimes identified with the
actions of God. She argues that Jesus likely thought of himself as a child of Sophia.

Robert Funk is one of the founders of the “Jesus Seminar”, a group of scholars who met twice a year to debate what Jesus actually said and did. The Jesus Seminar used colored beads to vote on the degree to which passages in the four New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas reflected the genuine teachings and actions of Jesus. Their findings were published in two books, The Five Gospels and The Acts of Jesus. Funk spelled out his own personal views in his book, Honest to Jesus, in which he argued that historians are obligated to isolate and verify every scrap of information about Jesus before accepting it as factual. According to Funk, Jesus was an irreverent, socially promiscuous deviant and secular sage who preached about God’s domain (kingdom) and who was probably eaten by dogs or crows.

In the ancient world there was a group of irreverent, secular sages known as Cynics. One of the most widely publicized Jesus scholars to argue for the Jewish Cynic thesis is John Dominic Crossan. In Historical Jesus; The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant, Crossan presents Jesus as an itinerant Jewish Cynic preacher who had no pretensions about being a messiah, much less a savior or son of God. Jesus’ vision was for a radically egalitarian social movement in which he thought of himself as no better than anyone else.

Although the Cynic sage thesis and work of the Jesus Seminar have been widely popularized in the media, they have also come under heavy fire by other Jesus scholars.

For example, Jesus under Fire edited by Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, is a collection of essays written specifically in response to issues raised by the Jesus Seminar. The Real Jesus by Timothy Luke Johnson critiques the work of Crossan, Spong and others, and concludes that their scholarship is in many cases, misguided and misleading. In Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way, Philip Jenkins attacks the uncritical use of unreliable sources by revisionist scholars. Finally, one of the most devastating critiques of the Cynic sage thesis is Cynic Sage or Son of God by Gregory Boyd.

**The Third Quest or “Schweitzerbahn”**

While scholars of the First and Second Quests generally rejected or downplayed the notion that Jesus was a healer, both Renewed and Third Quest scholars now readily acknowledge the fact that Jesus was known by his contemporaries as one who performed exorcisms and healings. There is no surviving evidence that anyone in the first century denied that Jesus did signs and wonders, but there was significant disagreement by Jesus’ contemporaries on the nature of those signs. While Jesus’ followers believed them to be works of God, his enemies dismissed them as magic or works of the devil.

In Jesus the Healer, Stevan Davies argues, instead, that the blindness, deafness, and demon possessions which Jesus “cured” were psychological disorders, and that Jesus’ healings and exorcisms can be largely understood under the anthropological model of “spirit-possession.” Graham Twelftree provides a more conservative perspective in his books, Jesus the Exorcist and Jesus the Miracle Worker. Twelftree provides extensive analysis of signs and wonders in the ancient world and concludes that miracles were a significant part of Jesus’ ministry.

With the emphasis on Jesus as a healer and exorcist it would be easy to conclude, with Marcus Borg, that Jesus was a religious ecstatic or “man of the spirit”. In Meeting Jesus again for the First Time, Borg himself insists, however, Jesus was not just a religious ecstatic; he was also a teacher of wisdom and a social prophet. Many Third Quest scholars would agree. For example, in Jesus the Prophet, R. David Kaylor agrees that Jesus was a “person of the Spirit”, but argues that the political and social aspects of Jesus’ message were most important. Richard Horsley also emphasizes the political and social aspects of Jesus’ ministry. In Jesus and the Spiral of Violence, Horsley provides extensive historical analysis of the oppression and resistance in the world of first century Palestine and attempts to place Jesus in this context.
Not all Third Quest scholars would agree with the degree of emphasis Kaylor and Horsley place on the overt political nature of Jesus’ message. Many scholars emphasize, instead, the idea of Jesus as an eschatological prophet. In other words, rather than seeing Jesus as a social prophet who actively works to bring about the kingdom of God, others emphasize Jesus as one who tries to prepare people for the inevitable coming of that kingdom. These are often degrees of emphasis rather than mutually exclusive categories. This is why many scholars who believe Jesus was an eschatological prophet also write about the social or political mission of Jesus.

For example, in A New Vision for Israel Scott McKnight presents Jesus as an eschatological and messianic prophet who had a political vision for the restoration of Israel. According to McKnight, Jesus, like other ancient Jewish prophets, was about calling the Jewish nation back to a right relationship with God, thereby restoring the nation and avoiding its destruction which Jesus predicted would come if repentance was not forthcoming.

While not denying the social aspect of Jesus’ message, other scholars tend to place more emphasis on the eschatological aspects. In Jesus of Nazareth; Millenarian Prophet, for example, Dale Alison provides a devastating critique of the non-eschatological views characteristic of the Renewed Quest, as well as a scholarly defense of Jesus as an eschatological prophet. Allison’s Jesus was a “Millenarian ascetic” who provided consolation to the oppressed, but preached judgment against the arrogant who feast while others starve.

E.P. Sanders is a prominent Third Quest scholar who is widely regarded as one of the world’s leading experts on Jesus as well as ancient Judaism. In The Historical Figure of Jesus, Sanders provides a list of what he regards as virtually certain historical facts about Jesus’ life, including his baptism by John, gathering disciples, preaching the kingdom of God, arrest, trial, execution and the fact that his disciples “saw” him after his death—though Sanders hastens to add that in what sense is not certain. According to Sanders Jesus was an eschatological prophet who thought of himself as the agent of the Spirit of God and presented his miracles as evidence that the new age was at hand.

One of the most comprehensive works on the historical Jesus yet published is John Meier’s three-volume set entitled A Marginal Jew. Meier provides thorough discussions of sources, methodology and criteria; and meticulously applies his criteria throughout his study. He concludes that Jesus was an eschatological prophet and healer who called the nation to repentance in light of the coming kingdom. At the same time, Jesus believed that the kingdom was already present in some sense in the exorcisms and healings he performed.

While agreeing that Jesus was a social and/or eschatological prophet, some scholars believe that Jesus thought of himself as more than a prophet. For example, N.T. Wright argues that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey he was undertaking a highly symbolic and prophetic action in which Jesus was embodying the return of God to his people as judge and redeemer. Wright’s books, The New Testament and the People of God; Jesus and the Victory of God; and Resurrection of the Son of God are three volumes in the series Christian Origins and the Question of God. In these groundbreaking works, Wright lays a foundation for the historical study of Jesus by discussing issues of epistemology, worldview, historiography and literary theory. Wright’s third volume is possibly one of the most thorough historical treatments of Jesus’ resurrection ever published. Several scholars responded to Wright’s work by publishing Jesus and the Restoration of Israel edited by Carey Newman, which is a collection of essays by scholars expressing both appreciation for Wright’s work and dissent over some of his views.

Recently, James Dunn contributed a thousand-page volume to the discussion. His book, Jesus Remembered provides an extensive overview of historical Jesus studies as well as a new methodology for research based on recent
studies in oral tradition. Dunn concludes that although Jesus was not comfortable with the title Messiah, since he disagreed with all the baggage that term entailed, Jesus nevertheless felt an intimate relationship with God and probably saw himself as one who transcended the traditional category of prophet.

Brown, Wright and Dunn are just a few of the scholars who believe that Jesus was known by some of his contemporaries as more than just a prophet. In The Gospels and Jesus Graham Stanton points out that not long after his crucifixion the followers of Jesus began worshiping him using language that had previously been reserved for God alone. Indeed, in Jesus as God Murray Harris provides a thorough scholarly study concluding that Jesus was in fact called “God” and described with attributes of deity in the earliest sources.

One of the most thorough defenses of the view that Jesus thought of himself as more than a prophet comes from Ben Witherington. In Jesus the Sage, Witherington traces the concept of wisdom through numerous ancient sources and concludes that Jesus was not only a Jewish sage or teacher of wisdom, but thought of himself as the very personification of the Wisdom of God. In his Christology of Jesus Witherington uses the same criteria and methodology recognized by virtually all Renewed and Third Quest scholars to demonstrate that Jesus thought of himself as more than a Jewish sage, teacher of wisdom, and described with attributes of deity.

With Witherington this essay comes full cycle. The Renewed/Third Quest tour began with Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, one of the most skeptical Jesus scholars, and ends with Ben Witherington, one of the most conservative. While the disagreements between them are enormous, they both grounded their understanding of Jesus in the historical and religious background of first century Judaism in which Wisdom was sometimes personified as an extension of God. Both see Jesus as one who believed that he was the very embodiment of divine Wisdom, or as the writer of the Gospel of John puts it, “The Word became human and lived among us”. Most Renewed and Third Quest scholars, however, would say that this goes too far. For example, in The Meaning of Jesus; Two Visions, Marcus Borg objects to the similar views of N.T. Wright by saying, “thinking that Jesus thought of himself in such grand terms raises serious questions about the mental health of Jesus”. Borg’s point is well taken and will be considered in the conclusion to this essay, but first, it may be helpful to review some important reference sources for the historical study of Jesus.

Reference and Resources

Introductions and Dictionaries

Any serious historical study of Jesus requires some understanding of the issues involved in the origin and interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels. One of the best guides for navigating these complex issues is Studying the Synoptic Gospels by Robert Stein. Other books provide an introduction to all aspects of historical Jesus studies including historical background, sources, literary theory, criteria of authenticity, and other issues. Among the best for this broad overview are Jesus and the Gospels by Craig Blomberg, and Studying the Historical Jesus by Darrell Bock. Handy reference works include The Cambridge Companion to Jesus, edited by Marcus Bockmuehl and the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels edited by Joel Green, a single volume dictionary of over 900 pages containing hundreds of signed articles.

Dialogues and Debates

Some of the most helpful literature on Jesus is published in the form of dialogues or debates which allow the reader to see both sides of various issues. The Meaning of Jesus; Two Visions is a cordial dialog between Renewed Quest scholar, Marcus Borg and Third Quest scholar N.T. Wright. For dialogues between Jewish and Christian writers see Jesus in two Perspectives by Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide.
and Christian writer Ulrich Luz. Who was Jesus? A Jewish Christian dialog, edited by Paul Copan and Craig Evans is discussion between a Christian and Jewish scholar with responses from other Christian and Jewish scholars. In debates the interaction is, of course, usually more confrontational and the resurrection of Jesus is often a hot topic. Did Jesus rise from the dead contains the transcript of a debate between Evangelical scholar Gary Habermas who argues in the affirmative, and world-class philosopher Anthony Flew arguing in the negative. The book also contains helpful responses from other scholars who critique the debate. Finally, in Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment edited by Paul Copan and Ronald Tacelli, prominent Renewed Quest scholar, Gerd Ludemann debates Evangelical philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig. Craig also debates Jesus Seminar co-founder, John Dominic Crossan in Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

Conclusion: Will the real Jesus please stand up?

In the ABC News special, The Search for Jesus, Peter Jennings correctly observes that Jewish scholars often disagree even when looking at exactly the same evidence. Of course, this is also true of lawyers, economists, and even medical doctors. Still, with so many views about Jesus, how is a layperson or librarian supposed to make sense of it all? A couple observations may be helpful.

First, in Jesus and Empire, Richard Horsley points out that if a book on Martin Luther King, Jr. were written based solely on isolated sayings taken out their social and literary context, we would not have an adequate understanding of the great civil rights leader or know why he was important. Horsley and most Third Quest scholars believe this is what the Renewed Quest does with Jesus when they pull isolated sayings out of their literary and social context and reinterpret them apart from any context. If this same degree of Renewed Quest skepticism were applied to the study of other figures in the ancient world, much of ancient history would of what is known about Alexander the Great was written nearly 400 years after he lived and most of that is attested in only one source. By contrast, most of what is known about Jesus of Nazareth was written between twenty and seventy years after he lived and is often attested in multiple sources.

Second, although Jesus scholars present differing views of Jesus, not all of these views are mutually exclusive. Marcus Borg, for example sees no contradiction between Jesus as a healer, a social prophet and a teacher of Jewish wisdom. Most Third Quest scholars would agree but add that Jesus fits the category of eschatological prophet as well. Some scholars go even further, saying that Jesus also made messianic claims and even presented himself as the embodiment of divine wisdom, the Son of God who believed his mission was to die for the sins of his people.

This, of course, goes well beyond what critical scholars are prepared to accept. For example, Borg argues that there are ‘categories of psychological diagnosis’ for people who claim to be messiahs or sons of God. On the other hand, there is reliable evidence that Jesus was, in fact, charged with blasphemy and that some people accused him of being demon possessed or mentally unstable, which is exactly the reaction that might be expected to someone who publicly presented himself as a messiah or Son of God.

Many would insist that whether Jesus actually was the Messiah or Son of God is a matter of faith which is beyond the reach of history as a discipline to determine. What seems very probable historically, however, is that Jesus' contemporaries looked at exactly the same evidence regarding Jesus' prophetic actions and teachings, his signs and wonders, and reports of his empty tomb and post-death appearances; and while some concluded that he was a blasphemer, insane, or even demon possessed, others were so convinced they willingly endured great suffering and gave their lives proclaiming him as Messiah, Savior, and even Son of God. ⚫