

Jesus as a Figure in History

*How Modern Historians
View the Man from Galilee*

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

My background is in journalism. I have been a New Testament professor for twenty-five years, but I suppose that I will always be a newspaper reporter at heart. It was in that spirit that I accepted the invitation to write the first edition of this book.

I approached the topic as a journalist, researching a current movement in academic studies, interviewing the major figures, and writing it all up in as descriptive and ideologically neutral a tone as possible. When I finished a section, I would send it to the scholar whose work was being discussed and solicit his or her feedback. After receiving the feedback, I would revise the chapter in question repeatedly until it met with the approval of the scholar whose work was under analysis. I heard back from everyone except E. P. Sanders. Thus, I did everything I could to ensure accuracy and fairness in my reporting. Contrary to popular opinion, I believe that is what most journalists do most of the time, at least when they are not under deadline.

I also tried not to have too many opinions—and this was fairly easy, because, although my level of *interest* in the topic was extraordinarily high, my level of *investment* was not. As a Christian, my faith in Christ does not depend on historical reconstruction for legitimation. And as a biblical scholar, most of my own professional work has involved the development and use of literary critical methods (narrative criticism, reader-response) for which questions of historicity tend to be irrelevant. Accordingly, it did not really matter to me personally or professionally which of the historical scholars were doing Jesus research right and which might be doing it wrong. I just found all of these scholars to be interesting and engaging people, and I found their work (except for some of the fine points on method) to be intrinsically fascinating.

The book did very well. It had little competition aside from a couple of survey volumes written by major players (Borg, Witherington) whose level of personal investment was high and who therefore evaluated everyone's contributions by

measuring them against the gold standard of their own work (nothing wrong with that—those books are excellent resources for their intended audiences). Since then, a few other surveys have appeared—the best, I think, is David B. Gowler’s *What Are They Saying about the Historical Jesus?* (Paulist, 2007). But after my book came out and I imagined I was finished with historical Jesus studies—I’d moved on to research a book on Christian rock music—a strange invitation came to me from out of the blue. I was asked to become Chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. This is the most important professional organization in America (and possibly in the world) for scholarship on the topic. The previous three chairs had been John Dominic Crossan, Marcus J. Borg, and N. T. Wright (three of the most important Jesus scholars of our day). To add Mark Allan Powell as the fourth name to *that* list did not seem right. “I’m *not* a historical Jesus scholar,” I protested, like Moses before the bush. “But you know the field,” Wright said. “And you’re fair to everyone . . . and people seem to like you.” Whether or not that last point was correct (more so *then* than now, I suspect), it did the trick. I am a sucker for flattery.

I took on a position I probably didn’t deserve to hold and did my best to live into it. I determined that this would now be the focal point of my professional life, and for the past decade, I have read everything I could find on the historical Jesus. I chaired all those meetings (aided by a revolving steering committee), deciding who should give papers—and on what topic—and who should respond to those papers or reply to the respondents. I became one of the founding editors of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*. I even made a few minor contributions to the field myself. And, now, I am happy to present a second edition of the book that started it all, written by someone who is no longer an outsider. On the one hand, that means this edition is a lot better informed than the first edition was. On the other hand, it means that I now have a lot more opinions than I used to; that said, I went back into journalist mode to produce this book, and I’m not sure that you will be able to tell what those opinions are. It is not that I try to feign neutrality; rather, I simply focus on *description* rather than on argument or advocacy. I describe views (whether or not I agree with those views) and then I describe criticisms of the views (whether or not I agree with those criticisms).

In any case, I definitely still know the field, I hope that I am still fair to everyone, and it would be really nice if people would still like me.

This edition of the book is over 50 percent longer than the last one, and about 33 percent of the material is completely new (which means there were a few, though not many, cuts). Nevertheless, the basic structure of the book (the outline of the chapters) remains the same. The centerpiece comprises chapter 3, which describes the work of several scholars who offer what I call snapshot images of particular aspects of who Jesus was, and chapters 4 through 9, which describe the work of scholars who have tried to produce comprehensive portraits or biographies of Jesus, taking into account everything we can possibly

know about him. I have added more scholars to the “snapshots” chapter, but the “big six” scholars in the other chapters remain the same: in my appraisal of the scene, fifteen years after the publication of the first edition, these scholars remain the most deserving of our primary attention. These are the people whose work defines almost all discussion of the historical Jesus, especially in the United States.

It bothers me that all of the scholars discussed in these six focal chapters are male—and all but N. T. Wright are North Americans. Maybe Paula Fredriksen or Gerd Theissen should have received the full chapter treatment. But for better or for worse, Crossan, Borg, Sanders, Meier, and Wright continue to be the names most cited in seminar papers, journal articles, dissertations, and the like—almost everybody else builds on their work or argues with it. And all but Sanders have continued to produce new works on Jesus since the first edition of this book appeared, requiring significant updates to their respective chapters.

But that’s only five names—the sixth “scholar” to get a full chapter is the corporate entity known as the Jesus Seminar. They are not really around anymore, and their influence as such may have faded. Still, the legacy of the Jesus Seminar remains strong; many individual members of the group remain active in the guild; and, let’s face it, of all the people discussed in this book, they are probably the most *interesting*. So grant a journalist that much: we can’t leave out the Jesus Seminar; at the very least, they provide an antidote to some of the boring stuff on method.

And that leads me to share a Jesus Seminar-related anecdote.

In the late 1990s, Robert W. Funk was invited to speak at a meeting of the Ohio Academy of Religion. The controversial founder of the Jesus Seminar was slated to give a very academic and fairly noncontroversial address on some topic of historical interest, but his mere presence in the heartland was noticed by the general populace, and the building where he was to lecture was surrounded by protestors with picket signs. Persons with bullhorns informed Funk, as he approached the building, that he was possessed by a demon and that he was going to hell. Indeed, threats of violence had been called in, necessitating police protection and armed bodyguards—a first for any plenary session of the OAR. The lecture was delayed because a man who claimed God had told him to prevent Funk from speaking stood up in the hall and began a filibuster of loud Scripture recitation until he was placed under arrest and physically removed.

I had been chosen to introduce Funk that night. When I finally got the chance to do so, appraising the situation, I began by saying, “Robert Funk is a man who gets people stirred up over things that matter.” I remember now that he liked that—it is a given that people will get stirred up; better they get stirred up over *things that matter* than over things that don’t.

But I said earlier that I approached the first edition of this book as a journalist who found the topic intriguing but for whom the results did not much matter, personally or professionally. I am hung now by my own words: these

things *do* matter. The historical study of Jesus touches on topics of fundamental importance to religion and to society, topics with profound implications for theology and piety as well as for politics, philosophy, and the very self-image of Western civilization.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I think that people were more easily stirred up over these issues than they are now. I'm not sure whether that is entirely good or only partly so. But historical Jesus scholars, their detractors, and even third-party observers should all recognize that these *are* things that matter.

Introduction

He comes as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee. He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants living long enough at subsistence level to know exactly where the line is drawn between poverty and destitution. He looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle. He speaks about the rule of God, and they listen as much from curiosity as anything else. They know all about rule and power, about kingdom and empire, but they know it in terms of tax and debt, malnutrition and sickness, agrarian oppression and demonic possession. What, they really want to know, can this kingdom of God do for a lame child, a blind parent, a demented soul screaming its tortured isolation among the graves that mark the edges of the village? Jesus walks with them to the tombs, and, in the silence after the exorcism, the villagers listen once more, but now with curiosity giving way to cupidity, fear, and embarrassment. He is invited, as honor demands, to the home of the village leader. He goes, instead, to stay in the home of a dispossessed woman. Not quite proper, to be sure, but it would be unwise to censure an exorcist, to criticize a magician.

—John Dominic Crossan¹

On a spring morning in about the year 30 CE, three men were executed by the Roman authorities in Judea. Two were “brigands” . . . the third was executed as another type of political criminal. He had not robbed, pillaged, murdered, or even stored arms. He was convicted, however, of having claimed to be “king of the Jews”—a political title. Those who looked on . . . doubtless thought that . . . the world would little note what happened that spring morning. . . . It turned out, of course, that the third man, Jesus of Nazareth, would become one of the most important figures in human history.

—E. P. Sanders²

Wake up Sunday morning and travel about your town. No matter where it is in America, you will find churches—congregations of all different sizes and structures, historic denominations and recent innovations, major “name brands” and generic community fellowships, sects, cults, and anonymous gatherings of people who haven’t yet figured out what sort of organization, if any, they want to employ. You will find people meeting in towering cathedrals and in rented-out storefronts, in spacious auditoriums and in ranch-style sanctuaries. You will see vestments and paraments, stained glass and video screens, expensive commissioned artwork and tacky homemade banners. And the people are as diverse as their furnishings. Look around long enough and you will see every sort of person in America: Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, executives, laborers, citizens, refugees, illegal aliens, the educated, the illiterate, the aged, the infirm, gays, lesbians, Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and so forth.

The most amazing thing about this is that all of these people have gotten out of bed and gathered with others on Sunday morning because of one person—a Jewish man who was born on the other side of the world over two thousand years ago.

Listen! You will hear congregations singing: “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun . . .”; “What a friend we have in Jesus...”; “All hail the power of Jesus’ name . . .”

You will hear groups reciting a creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father.

You will hear an evangelist exhorting individuals to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, inviting them to ask him into their hearts to cleanse them from sin. You will hear inspired worshipers claiming that Jesus has spoken to them this very morning and given them a word of direction for others who are present. You will hear a priest intoning Latin or Greek and promising those who have gathered that they are about to eat the flesh of Jesus and consume his blood.

If you are not one of these people—if you are not a Christian—all of this may seem bizarre. Even if you are a Christian, *some* of this may seem bizarre, for you probably have some ideas about which groups of Christians have got this Jesus stuff right and which have got it wrong.

What could we say about Jesus that almost everyone would agree is right? What could we possibly say that all the different types of Christians and even the non-Christians would accept? That he lived and died? Anything else?

Studying Jesus as a figure in history is different from studying him as the object of religious devotion or faith. That much is clear, but just *how* is it different? Many may think that religion should be concerned with *beliefs* about Jesus, and history with *facts* concerning him. For example, if I say, “Jesus died by crucifixion,” that is a historical fact, but if I say, “Jesus died for our sins,” that is a religious belief. We would expect for good history to confine itself to the facts. Historians should do history, and theology should be left to the theologians.

If only it were that simple! The line between facts and beliefs is not always as clear as in the example just cited. In a sense, nothing can ever be proven absolutely to have happened. History, especially ancient history, deals with degrees of plausibility. Some matters do come to be regarded as facts after careful analysis of evidence, but the standards by which this evidence is evaluated are grounded in beliefs. Honest historians readily admit to the role that ideology plays in their discipline. At the very least, they approach their task with ideas about what is intrinsically likely or unlikely and about what constitutes good evidence. Such ideas are inevitably debatable.

With regard to Jesus, the task of defining what constitutes a historical approach can be especially difficult. For one thing, most scholars who study Jesus are likely to have personal investment in the outcome of their work. In itself, this problem is not unique, since historians do not usually study people they care nothing about. Still, with Jesus, the level of investment tends to be especially pronounced. Paul Hollenbach admits that he pursues the Jesus of history “in order to overthrow, not simply correct, the mistake called Christianity.”³ Frederick Gaiser maintains that he undertakes such historical investigation as an act of faith in “the incarnational God who took the risk of making himself the object of historical study.”⁴ What do we make of such biases? Some may think Hollenbach and Gaiser are likely to be bad historians because they are so blatantly prejudiced. Others may think they could be good historians because they are aware of their prejudices and state them outright. In any case, the mere fact that they *have* biases does not invalidate their research. If they uncover significant points about Jesus, they deserve to have these considered (and tested) by the academic guild of their peers as surely as do scholars who do not pursue their work with an admitted agenda.

Jesus studies can also be complicated by the exceptional character of the incidents reported. Various sources (biblical and otherwise) claim that Jesus was known for doing extraordinary things—working miracles, knowing the thoughts of others, predicting the future, and so on. Historians are accustomed to dismissing such reports. Some sources attribute miracles to Julius Caesar, for instance, but no reputable modern biography would claim that the Roman emperor possessed supernatural powers. Rather, historians realize that such legends often accrue around figures of renown and that such accounts may have been received more readily at a time when superstition held more sway than science. But the connection of Jesus to events that would be considered exceptional (if not impossible) is hardly peripheral. Many would claim that apart from some such events (for instance, his resurrection from the dead), he would not be remembered at all. So

what is the historian to do? To claim that something happened that historical science regards as impossible seems by definition to be bad history. But to dismiss a claim that something ordinarily impossible happened by saying, "It could not have happened because it is impossible," is clearly an exercise in circular reasoning. As we shall see, the historians discussed in this book deal with this philosophical problem differently.

So the distinction between historical and theological studies of Jesus is neither absolute nor clear. Apart from these problems, however, at least two points of agreement can be stated.

First, studying Jesus as a figure in history means studying the person who lived on this earth in the early decades of what we now call the first century (because of him, in fact). It does not involve studying the heavenly or spiritual figure whom Christians worship, or the entity who Christians say dwells in the midst of their assemblies or lives in their individual hearts. It does not involve studying the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, whom Christians claim has been present since before the creation of the cosmos and, indeed, was responsible for its creation. Theology connects all of these figures with Jesus, but historical science does not.

Over a century ago, a scholar named Martin Kähler made a distinction between "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith."⁵ The former is the subject of historical study; the latter, of theological reflection and religious devotion. The distinction proved both useful and problematic. Most Christians would reject the notion that the Jesus who now sits at the right hand of God to hear their prayers is a different person than the Jesus who lived and worked in Galilee. Recently, Marcus Borg has tried to offer a more neutral distinction: historians study the "pre-Easter Jesus" while Christians not only revere this person but also worship and claim to experience the reality of a "post-Easter Jesus."⁶ Christians may believe the post-Easter Jesus is the same person as the historical figure if they wish, but historians do not have to believe in this post-Easter figure to study the man who lived before Easter.

Christians who find this distinction unsettling may take comfort in recognizing that it is made in the New Testament by Jesus himself. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus (before Easter) tells his disciples, "You will not always have me [with you]" (Matt. 26:11). Then, a few days later (after Easter), he tells those same disciples, "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). This is not a contradiction; the point is simply that Jesus will be present with his followers after Easter in a different way than he was before Easter. To use Borg's terminology, Matthew 26:11 refers to the pre-Easter Jesus (who the disciple will not always have with them); Matthew 28:20 refers to the post-Easter Jesus (who, according to this Gospel, will always be with the disciples).

Second, studying Jesus as a figure in history means treating all of the ancient sources regarding him as historical documents rather than as privileged or inspired literature. Historians may, of course, believe that the writings about Jesus in the Bible are Holy Scripture, but, *as historians*, they cannot simply assert that claim to justify what they say about him. No historian can get away with saying, "I

think this should be regarded as a historical fact because the Bible says this and I believe everything the Bible says is true.” Such a statement might be regarded as good theology in some camps, but in no quarter would it be regarded as good history. Those who study Jesus as a figure in history are not trying to summarize what the Bible says about Jesus (which would be a relatively simple task). They are trying to sift through that material, as well as other, nonbiblical materials, to find content that can be judged reliable from the perspective of modern historical science.

Christians need to keep this point in mind when evaluating historical treatments of Jesus. There may be a subconscious tendency to evaluate positively anything a historian asserts that accords with biblical content and negatively anything that contradicts it. To take an example, when historian John Meier says that Jesus baptized people,⁷ we should not think that he erroneously derived this from John 3:22 without paying attention to the correction offered in John 4:1–2. Meier knows these verses (as well as John 3:26). He bases his claim that Jesus baptized people on his critical decision as a historian that John 4:1–2 does not seek to correct a misunderstanding but to refute a correct understanding (that Jesus was in fact baptizing). Those who understand Meier’s position may think that he is wrong; they might decide that his historical judgment is flawed and that a different conclusion makes better sense. Still, that would be quite different from saying Meier is wrong because he doubts the accuracy of a statement in the Bible. In the latter instance, the argument cannot be pursued on historical grounds. Unless we recognize these ground rules, arguments can quickly become silly as the dialogue partners discover (or, worse, fail to discover) that they are speaking different languages.

These two points are only exemplary of the sort of concerns that emerge when scholars decide to study Jesus as a figure in history. Other issues will come to the fore as we proceed. For now, I suggest that readers consider a question that sometimes helps to bring some of these points into focus: What should be taught about Jesus in the public schools? In the United States, it is considered inappropriate if not illegal for a public school teacher to instruct students in matters of religious faith. Most Americans, including Christians, would consider a public school teacher out of line if he or she spoke of Jesus as a living reality today (e.g., telling students, “Jesus loves you and he will answer your prayers”) or affirmed the authority of the Bible as a divinely inspired source for learning about Jesus. Most would probably also think it inappropriate for a teacher to tell public school children that Jesus was miraculously born to a virgin or that he rose from the dead. It might be appropriate for a teacher to say that the Bible reports these things about Jesus or that Christians believe these things about him, but it would be crossing a line to state that such things actually happened. But what are “the facts” about Jesus? What is there about Jesus that *all* children—be they Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist—ought to know?

By almost any account, Jesus is one of the most significant persons ever to have lived. Recognizing this, the public schools have not ignored him completely.

Figure 1 presents everything that one widely used high school textbook has to say about Jesus. Supposedly, all of this information is based on solid historical research, apart from presuppositions of faith. Although many contemporary historians would actually dispute a number of matters reported here (e.g., that Jesus was born in Bethlehem), almost all modern historians would also regard the information presented in this text as skimpy. Fear of controversy, perhaps, assures Jesus of receiving less attention in the curriculum than his influence on world history would commend. Ironically, public school students in countries where the presence of Christianity is minimal often learn more about Jesus than do students in the United States.

We can make two further observations about the information presented in figure 1: On the one hand, nothing is asserted here that would necessarily prove the legitimacy of the Christian faith; on the other hand, nothing is asserted that would expose it as fraudulent. As we will see, the historians discussed in this book go beyond the observations offered in these schoolbooks in ways that defy both of these points. Sometimes, those who study Jesus as a figure in history do offer assertions that, if valid, would either confirm or challenge tenets of faith. If beliefs affect how one determines facts, then facts may also affect what one determines to believe.

The historical study of Jesus has progressed for more than two centuries now, and significant results have started to come in. Toward the end of the twentieth century, they began *pouring* in, and the last twenty-five years of scholarship have witnessed an avalanche of published tomes on Jesus written by a variety of historical scholars. Sometimes the results of these studies are sensationalized in media reports; more often, they remain hidden in academic literature not accessible to the general reader. In any case, it seems appropriate now to provide a simple, sober, and sincere report of this quest in its current stage. We should not expect unanimity, but we will discover broad areas of agreement. We will also see, in sharp focus, what remain the “hot topics” for discussion and dialogue, the questions on which even the most reputable historians do not agree.

Chapter 1 will offer a brief tour of the discipline up to the present, focusing on some of the key players and the contributions they have made to defining the questions that must now be addressed. Those who want to skip this and jump right into the main part of the book can probably do so without severe penalty, but the chapter does provide a good context for understanding how we got to where we are.

Chapter 2 describes principles and procedures that are widely accepted by those who do this sort of work. In particular, we will identify the key sources for studying Jesus (not just the Bible) and list the criteria that scholars use in making historical judgments on particular matters. Unless you are familiar with this material already, this chapter is probably a prerequisite for making sense of the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 presents what I call “snapshots,” brief descriptions of images that scholars have suggested may apply to Jesus. Some of these are controversial;

Figure 1. Section on Jesus in a Public School Textbook

Although the exact date is uncertain, historians believe that sometime around 6 to 4 B.C., a Jew named Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Jesus was raised in the village of Nazareth in northern Palestine. He was baptized by a prophet known as John the Baptist. As a young man, he took up the trade of carpentry.

At the age of thirty, Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. His teachings contained many ideas from Jewish religion, such as monotheism, or belief in only one God, and the principles of the Ten Commandments. Jesus emphasized God's personal relationship to each human being. He stressed the importance of people's love for God, their neighbors, their enemies, and even themselves. He also taught that God would end wickedness in the world and would establish an eternal kingdom after death for people who sincerely repented of their sins.

Historical records of the time mention very little about Jesus. The main source of information about his teachings is the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament of the Bible. Some of the Gospels are thought to have been written by one or more of Jesus' disciples or pupils. These 12 men later came to be called apostles.

As Jesus preached from town to town, his fame grew. He attracted large crowds and many people were touched by his message. Because Jesus ignored wealth and status, his message had special appeal to the poor. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," he said. His words, as related in the Gospels, were simple and direct.

Jesus' growing popularity concerned both Roman and Jewish leaders. When he visited Jerusalem about A.D. 29, enthusiastic crowds greeted him as the Messiah or king—the one whom the Bible had said would come to rescue the Jews. The chief priests of the Jews, however, denied that Jesus was the Messiah. They said his teachings were blasphemy, or contempt for God. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate accused Jesus of defying the authority of Rome. Pilate arrested Jesus and sentenced him to be crucified, or nailed to a large wooden cross to die.

After Jesus' death, his body was placed in a tomb. According to the Gospels, three days later his body was gone and a living Jesus began appearing to his followers. The Gospels go on to say that then he ascended into heaven. The apostles were more convinced than ever that Jesus was the Messiah. It was from this belief that Jesus came to be referred to as Jesus Christ. *Christos* is a Greek word meaning "messiah" or "savior." The name *Christianity* was derived from "Christ."

—Roger B. Beck, Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Philip C. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka, *World History, Grades 9–12: Patterns of Interaction* (McDougal Little/Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 168–69.

some are pretty traditional. In no case does one image or snapshot offer a full picture of Jesus. Rather, they offer proposals regarding certain aspects of who Jesus was, or suggestions of how he appeared to some people some of the time. I suspect that many readers will find the material in this chapter quite fascinating.

Chapters 4 through 9 offer in-depth descriptions of six highly influential studies of Jesus, all of which were produced in the last twenty-five years. In each of these cases, the scholar or group of scholars has attempted to produce a more-or-less comprehensive biography of Jesus—not just a “snapshot” image of one particular feature or aspect. These six chapters may be read in any order, depending on interest. In each case, I present (1) an overview of the method or approach used by the particular scholar or team of scholars, (2) a summary of the results that have been obtained (a portrait of who Jesus was according to this view), and (3) a summary of the criticisms of this work that have been offered by other historians.

Finally, chapter 10 offers some summary, cross-referencing topics on which scholars agree and disagree.

The appendixes—new to this edition—deal with matters of interest that are somewhat tangential to mainstream historical Jesus research. We take up, in turn, the work of scholars who (1) claim Jesus never existed, (2) seek to defend the historicity of biblical reports, or (3) try to develop a psychological profile for Jesus.

I strive to offer unbiased reports throughout, yet I do not wish to feign objectivity, to pretend that I myself am somehow free of that element of personal investment that affects those I describe. I think, therefore, that I must now state what I believe.⁸ I shall intrude so blatantly in this manner only once now, and then, again, at the very end. I will try very hard to keep my prejudices in check the rest of the time.

I now have a strong professional interest in what I call the “Jesus of history” but, as a Christian, I trust my life and destiny to what I call “the Jesus of story,” that is, the Jesus who is revealed in the gospel story disclosed in the Bible, proclaimed by the church, and received (accepted or rejected) by the world. By identifying Jesus with a story, I do not mean to indicate that I regard him as no more than a fictional character in literature. I think I would have to be a bigger fool than I am to trust my life or destiny to a cipher. No, I mean that for me the identity and significance of Jesus is inextricably caught up with a story, and that the Jesus of this story is given meaning and content by the effect and impact that his story has on its audience. Every reaction to Jesus, positive or negative, may become part of the story of Jesus—a story I personally regard as ultimately trustworthy, transformative, and true.

The distinction between what I call the “Jesus of story” and the “Jesus of history” is not chronological, as are Kähler’s and Borg’s distinctions. The story of Jesus begins before anything that can reasonably be identified as historical and continues long after everything that can be identified as historical. The Jesus of story is the larger entity of which the Jesus of history is but a part. History *is* a part of the story, so understanding Jesus as a figure in history remains significant to

anyone who wants to believe the story and trust the Jesus it reveals. Still, for me, trusting the Jesus of this story means more than knowing history: it also involves being attentive to the witness of the Spirit, to the testimonies of saints, sinners, martyrs, and heretics, and to my own life experience.

The story is grounded in history, but, for me, the authenticity (or “truth”) of the story does not ultimately depend on the historicity of every aspect or detail. If one asks *how much* of the story—or *which aspects* of the story—must be historically accurate (or even historically verifiable) for the story to remain trustworthy and true, . . . I have no good answer. That would be a *theological* question or even a *spiritual* question; it is something that I think about from time to time, but I have never been able to answer. I am sure that there is a line somewhere, a point at which if I became convinced the story lacked historical viability I would have to regard it as a falsehood, as a story to be rejected—or, at least, as a tale to be valued only for its charm, values, and symbolism. I am not certain where that line might be, but, in my most honest pursuit of the historical Jesus thus far, I can say that I have never come close to crossing it.

I hope this book proves as useful and important as its subject matter warrants. If you appreciate it, you will want to join me in thanking Trinity Lutheran Seminary for providing a community that encourages and facilitates such contributions on the part of its faculty; Westminster John Knox Press (with editor Marianne Blickenstaff) for helping me to develop the manuscript, improve it, and bring it to publication; and Melissa, David, Michael, Brandon, and Jillian—my lively, loving family—for filling my life with the joy that, I hope, pervades everything I do.

Chapter 1

Historians Discover Jesus

He comes to us as one unknown.

—Albert Schweitzer (1906)¹

I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.

—Rudolf Bultmann (1926)²

No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus.

—Günther Bornkamm (1956)³

We can know quite a lot about Jesus; not enough to write a modern-style biography, including the colour of the subject's hair, and what he liked for breakfast, but quite a lot.

—N. T. Wright (1996)⁴

Historians search for Jesus for a variety of reasons. Some may be intellectually curious or intrigued by the challenge. Some hope to facilitate dialogue between religious communities and secular society. Some may wish to substantiate the Christian faith while others may want to discredit it. Many, no doubt, just want to submit their faith to honest scrutiny in the belief that only then can it be confessed with integrity. For whatever reason, the historian's quest for Jesus has been proceeding for over two centuries now. Although this book is primarily concerned with the flood of Jesus scholarship produced in

the last twenty-five years (or so), we should begin with a survey of what has come before.

GOSPEL HARMONIES

For centuries, Jesus was not studied as a historical figure in the modern sense. Non-Christian scholars took little or no interest in him, and Christian scholars simply regarded the biblical accounts as straightforward historical records of his life. One problem, however, was noted early on: The Bible presents four different records of Jesus' life, and those four accounts do not always seem to agree on what they report concerning him. Thus, for many centuries, creating a historical biography of Jesus was basically a matter of harmonizing the four Gospel narratives. This was actually done for the first time less than a hundred years after the Gospels themselves were written. A Mesopotamian Christian named Tatian wove the four Gospel accounts together into one continuous narrative, which he called the Diatessaron ("four-in-one"). The work was translated into several languages and was widely used for three hundred years. The Syriac version appears to have replaced the four individual Gospels in the Bibles of some churches.

We can only imagine what sort of decisions Tatian and others like him had to make as they sought to harmonize the Gospels. First would be the simple question of chronology: even if we grant that Jesus did all of the things reported in all of the Gospels, we will still have to ask in what order he did these things. Creating one story from four accounts forces the scholar to place some events ahead of others. In addition, we would have to ask about repetition. All four Gospels contain stories of Jesus turning over tables in the Jerusalem temple (Matt. 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–17). Do we assume that these are four reports of the same event? In the first three Gospels, the account comes near the end of the story, but in John it comes near the beginning. Did Jesus turn over tables in the temple twice? Some thirteen hundred years later, Martin Luther, confronted with precisely the same problem, would write, "The Gospels follow no order in recording the acts and miracles of Jesus, and the matter is not, after all, of much importance. If a difficulty arises in regard to the Holy Scripture and we cannot solve it, we must just let it alone."⁵

There also would be the question of contradiction. In Matthew 8:5–13, a centurion comes to Jesus in Capernaum and asks that Jesus heal his servant, while in Luke 7:1–10, the same centurion sends Jewish elders to ask Jesus to heal his servant. The words attributed to the centurion (Matt. 8:8–9) or to his friends (Luke 7:6–8) are almost identical. How are these two accounts to be harmonized? It seems unlikely that they are reports of two different events, that Jesus healed this poor man from a distance twice, saying the same things both times (once to the centurion's representatives and once to the centurion himself). The latter view has actually been tried⁶ and is still sometimes asserted by fundamentalists,⁷ but for the most part has been found wanting. But if the two stories report the same event,

should a Gospel harmony such as Tatian's have the centurion go to Jesus in person, send a delegation, or both? Some scholars, notably John Calvin, despaired of producing a continuous narrative like the *Diatessaron* and simply presented similar stories from different Gospels side by side in parallel columns.⁸

In producing Gospel harmonies, scholars were already asking historical questions about Jesus, but they did so within a context of faith, not skepticism.⁹ But this approach would be challenged by the Enlightenment, the European movement that exalted the use of reason as the best means for discovering truth. The Enlightenment emphasized the orderliness of nature and so encouraged disciplined scholarship that adhered to well-defined methods for testing and verifying hypotheses. It furthered the acquisition of knowledge and the development of critical thinking. Though initially a philosophical movement (featuring such luminaries as Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire), the new orientation led to tremendous advances in science and mathematics. Eventually, its effects were felt on politics and on religion. One legacy of the Enlightenment for Western thought was a lasting distrust of assertions that cannot be verified. The distinction between religious faith and superstition came to be regarded as simply a matter of perspective.¹⁰

“LIVES” OF JESUS

During the period following the Enlightenment, scholars embarked on what came to be known as “the quest for the historical Jesus.” They went beyond the production of Gospel harmonies to write biographies, called Lives of Jesus. A Life of Jesus might draw heavily upon harmonization of the Gospel accounts, but it differed from such accounts in at least three ways. It would (1) typically impose some grand scheme or hypothesis upon the material that allowed everything to be interpreted in accord with a consistent paradigm (for example, “Jesus was a social reformer” or “Jesus was a religious mystic”); (2) exclude material in the Gospels that did not fit with this paradigm, submitting the biblical record to the author's critical judgment of what seemed most likely to be correct; and (3) include reflection about Jesus not derived from the Gospels, attempting to fill in gaps in the biblical record with the author's own projections concerning Jesus' motivations, goals, or self-understanding.

Hundreds of these Lives of Jesus were produced, mainly during the nineteenth century. Below is a sampling of some of the most influential.

Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768). Reimarus was a respected professor of Oriental languages at the University of Hamburg and his works on Jesus were not published until after his death. Apparently, he feared retribution for his controversial views during his lifetime. In any case, fragments of a large unpublished manuscript were printed between 1774 and 1778, and these mark what many consider to be the beginning of the quest for the historical Jesus.¹¹ Reimarus

maintained that Jesus (the actual historical person, not the theological figure created by the church) was an unsuccessful political claimant who thought it was his destiny to be established by God as king of the restored people of Israel. Reimarus interpreted all the passages in the New Testament where Jesus speaks of “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” as references to a new political reality about to be established on earth. Thus, Reimarus said, Jesus believed he was the Messiah (or “Christ”), but he meant this in a worldly sense. He thought that God was going to deliver the people of Israel from bondage to the Romans and create a new and powerful kingdom on earth where Jesus himself would rule as king. This is why he was executed, charged with the crime of claiming to be the King of the Jews (Matt. 27:37). This is also why, when he died, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). He realized in his last moments that God had failed him, that his hopes had been misplaced. His disciples, however, were unable to accept this outcome. Not wanting to return to their mundane lives in Galilee, they stole his body from its tomb, claimed he had been raised from the dead (see Matt. 28:11–15), and made up a new story about how Jesus had died willingly as an atonement for sins. The message of the kingdom was spiritualized, and the teaching of the failed religious fanatic was transformed into a religion promising salvation after death to those who joined an organization led by his followers. Thus, “the new system of a suffering spiritual savior, which no one had ever known or thought before, was invented only because the first hopes had failed.”¹² Reimarus’s work seemed to be obviously agenda-driven, attacking a religion he had come to despise. Still, it raised questions and issues that had not been examined previously, and the audacity of his claims demanded engagement on historical grounds. Thus, Albert Schweitzer, who completely disagreed with the main thesis, nevertheless hailed Reimarus’s publication as “one of the greatest events in the history of criticism.” As a side note, he also called it “a masterpiece of general literature,” reflecting on the passion with which Reimarus spewed his venom against Christian religion: “It is as though the fires of a volcano were painting lurid pictures upon dark clouds. Seldom has there been a hate so eloquent, a scorn so lofty.”¹³

Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761–1851). Paulus was a veteran rationalist who would become best known for offering naturalistic explanations for miracle stories reported in the Gospels. As professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg, he published a two-volume work on the life of Jesus in 1828.¹⁴ In essence, it was a Gospel harmony with explanatory notes. Paulus accepted the miracle stories as reports of historical events, but he reasoned that a primitive knowledge of the laws of nature led people in biblical times to regard as supernatural occurrences what the advancement of knowledge has rendered understandable. For example, Jesus may have appeared to walk on water when he strode along the shore in a mist and he may have received credit for stilling a storm when the weather coincidentally improved after he awoke from sleep on a boat trip. Jesus healed people by improving their psychological disposition or, sometimes, by

applying medicines mixed with mud (John 9:6) or saliva (Mark 8:23). Likewise, his disciples were provided with medicinal oil to use for curing certain ailments (Mark 6:13). The story of the feeding of the five thousand recalls a time when Jesus and his disciples generously shared their own provisions with those who had none, inspiring others in the crowd to do the same until everyone was satisfied. Paulus's book evoked a good deal of opposition at the time of its appearance, but its ideas continued (and still continue) to resurface, especially in writings of those who do not otherwise know what to do with the miracles.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874). Strauss appealed to modern understandings of mythology to steer a middle course between naive acceptance of Gospel stories and the sort of simplistic explanations for these stories offered by Paulus. In 1835, Strauss published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a two-volume work over fourteen hundred pages in length.¹⁵ He called for unbiased historical research to be done on the Gospels, establishing an orientation for scholarship that is still followed by many today. He discerned, for instance, that the stories in the first three Gospels are less developed than those in John which, accordingly, is the least valuable book for historical reconstruction. Still, Strauss regarded most of the stories in all the Gospels as myths, developed often on the pattern of Old Testament prototypes. The point of such tales is not to record a historical occurrence as it happened but, rather, to interpret an event in light of religious ideas. For example, the story of Jesus' baptism includes references to the Spirit descending as a dove on Jesus and a voice speaking from heaven. These things did not actually happen in the strict historical sense, but they interpret the significance of something that did occur. Jesus really was baptized by John, and his sense of mission was somehow related to what he experienced on that occasion. Strauss's view of the Gospels as "history interpreted through myth" evinced a growing recognition on the part of scholars that these books describe "the Jesus of history" from a perspective that regards him as "the Christ of faith," a perspective that (supposedly) unbiased historians cannot endorse. Nevertheless, in its own day Strauss's work was highly controversial, and the publication of this influential book caused him to lose his position at the University of Zurich.

Ernst Renan (1823–1892). Renan combined critical scholarship with novelistic aesthetic appeal to create what was probably the most widely read Life of Jesus in his day.¹⁶ Published in 1863, the book broke with rationalism in its attempt to discern the emotional impact of the Jesus tradition and to trace the reasons for this to the passions, individuality, and spontaneity of Jesus himself. Regarding the Gospels as "legendary biographies," Renan sought to uncover the personality that inspired the legends while also displaying his own penchant for poetic, even sentimental, description. For example, since Jesus is said to have ridden into Jerusalem on a mule (in modern translations, an ass or a donkey), Renan imagines that he typically traveled about the countryside seated on "that favorite riding-animal of the East, which is so docile and sure-footed and whose

great dark eyes, shaded with long lashes, are full of gentleness.”¹⁷ Renan also attempted to fit the Gospel materials into an overall chronology for the life of Jesus. He described the initial years as “a Galilean springtide,”¹⁸ a sunny period in which Jesus was an amiable carpenter who rode his gentle mule from town to town sharing a “sweet theology of love” that he had discerned through observation of nature.¹⁹ Eventually, however, Jesus visited the capital city of Jerusalem, where his winsome message met with opposition from the rabbis. This led him to develop an increasingly revolutionary stance with a harsher tone, to despair of earthly ambitions, and at last to invite persecution and martyrdom. Renan’s book was a bestseller, but it did not receive universal acclaim. Its imaginative reworking of biblical materials invoked the wrath of traditional Christians (Renan suggested the raising of Lazarus was a “staged miracle,” a deliberate hoax designed to win acclaim for Jesus), while its sentimental features brought scorn from other historical Jesus scholars.²⁰ Like Strauss, Renan was fired from his university professorship, in this case from a position at the College de France that he had held for less than a year.

What lessons are to be learned from these Lives of Jesus, aside from the observation that such scholarship can be deleterious to one’s career? While Reimarus’s writings were overtly hostile to Christianity, the other three authors all viewed themselves as Christian theologians who sought to discover or salvage something in the biblical tradition that could be recognized as universally true. All four were skeptical of the miracle stories, displaying a reluctance to accept anything that deals with the supernatural as a straightforward historical account. All questioned the accuracy of the Gospels at certain points and sought to supplement the stories with what they thought were reasonable conjectures at other points.

Another important observation, however, was noted with verve by Albert Schweitzer in 1906. The authors just discussed, and numerous others, all managed to produce portraits of Jesus *that they personally found appealing*. For the non-Christian, the historical Jesus rather conveniently turned out to be a fraud. For the Christian, the historical Jesus seemed in every case to end up believing things that the author believed and valuing things that the author valued. The scholars, Schweitzer claimed, had modernized Jesus, dressing him in clothes of their own design. Their interest, whether conscious or not, was in discovering a figure who would be relevant for their time, and this interest prevented them from seeing Jesus as a figure in his own time, as a figure of the past, a figure *in history*. One sign of this was that the Christian studies tended to present Jesus in a fairly generic ethnic guise—there was little about him that seemed specifically Jewish.

THE WORK AND LEGACY OF SCHWEITZER

According to Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), the so-called quest for the historical Jesus had tended to become a quest for the relevant Jesus. Historical accuracy and

relevance are not, of course, necessarily mutually exclusive, but Schweitzer maintained that scholars had failed to reckon with the possibility that they might be. In the final analysis, Schweitzer concluded, the quest had yielded only negative results.²¹ Did that stop Schweitzer himself from trying? No way! His survey of flawed attempts served as a prelude to his own description of the historical figure of Jesus, a portrait that did avoid the trap of modernizing Jesus and, so, came to be regarded (until recently) as the most important study of Jesus ever produced by a historian.

Schweitzer identified the missing element in most of the Lives of Jesus as eschatology. The word *eschatology* literally means “study of last things”; in theology, it usually refers to what one believes regarding the future—life after death, the final judgment, the end of the world, and so forth. Schweitzer believed that the numerous sayings of Jesus regarding the future belong to the oldest and best-preserved stratum of material in the Gospels. He maintained that this material, neglected by most previous Jesus scholars, comes as close to preserving the original, primitive setting of Jesus as we can get. It records Jesus saying things that were hardly relevant when the Gospels were written, much less today. And what does this material reveal? It reveals Jesus to be a prophet who announced the end of the world, who declared that the kingdom of God was about to arrive (Mark 1:15). Especially in the first three Gospels, Jesus talks more about the kingdom of God than he does about anything else. Drawing heavily on the work of Johannes Weiss, Schweitzer claimed that Jesus’ beliefs about this coming kingdom held the key to understanding everything that he said and did.²² This realization could be embarrassing to Christian scholars, Schweitzer realized, because in the modern world people who go about declaring, “The end is near!” tend to be regarded as crackpots. Furthermore, we are left with the unsettling possibility that Jesus might have been wrong in making such a claim since, obviously, the world did not end.

Jesus *was* wrong, Schweitzer concluded; in fact, he was wrong *twice*. In the early period of his ministry, Jesus apparently believed that God was about to send a supernatural figure whom he called “the Son of Man” to establish the kingdom. At one point, Jesus sent his disciples out on a brief preaching tour, telling them, “You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). But, of course, the disciples completed their mission and the Son of Man did not come. At this point, Jesus seems to have reconsidered the matter and come to a dark but startling conclusion. He decided that he himself was to become the Son of Man, and that he could do this only through suffering (see Mark 8:31–33). Previously, he had told his disciples that *they* would have to suffer before the Son of Man arrived (Matt. 10:17–22); now he realized that he must bear the suffering alone. He set in motion processes that would be sure to bring persecution and even death, believing this would prompt God to act, to bring in the kingdom and exalt him as the glorified Son of Man. Schweitzer’s description of this plan would become famous (though he decided to omit these words from later editions of his book):

[Jesus] lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.²³

The kingdom did not come. Jesus was wrong again. His death, as noble and inspiring as his life, did not effect the change that he believed it would.

Schweitzer's portrait of Jesus as a misguided eschatological prophet stripped him of relevance for the contemporary age. As one scholar puts it, Schweitzer "tore down sentimental portraits of Jesus and, like a revolutionary replacing the monarch's portrait on the schoolroom wall with that of the new leader, put up instead the sharp, indeed shocking, drawing of Jesus the towering prophetic genius."²⁴ Yet this (mistaken) genius remained a foreigner. "The historical Jesus," said Schweitzer, "will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."²⁵

Schweitzer's book was a bombshell, affecting historical Jesus research for decades. Schweitzer himself went on to do many other notable things. He became one of the twentieth century's most brilliant doctors, serving as a medical missionary in West Africa, and he was eventually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He also earned renown as one of his century's great organists, wrote a biography of Bach, and published works on the philosophy of Goethe and on the development of Indian thought. Still, it was his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* for which he would be remembered in academic religious circles: at the turn of the millennium, numerous Christian magazines would include that book (published in 1906!) on their "short lists" of the most significant theological publications of the twentieth century.

SCHOLARSHIP AFTER SCHWEITZER

In the decades that followed Schweitzer's tome, historical Jesus studies continued unabated, but many of the works that were produced would not retain enduring significance for scholars working in the field today.²⁶ Indeed, modern scholars sometimes view the first half of the twentieth century as a time when historical Jesus research was in decline.²⁷ A more accurate analysis would maintain that interest in the subject waned in certain quarters, including dominant expressions of Protestant Christianity. At least two different reasons are often cited for this.

First, Schweitzer's incisive analysis of his forbears made it difficult for any scholar who followed him to avoid the stigma of bias, of modernizing Jesus in accord with their own wishful thinking or simply for the sake of contemporary

relevance. Schweitzer's book had created what we might call a catch-22 in historical Jesus studies: the mark of unbiased scholarship was that it did not try to establish Jesus as relevant for today, but if the historical Jesus is *not* relevant for today, then why study him in the first place?

Second, a major movement in Protestant Christian theology drew upon twentieth-century existentialism in ways that made questions regarding the historical Jesus increasingly insignificant. Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, believed that "the Christ of faith" *alone* was significant for theology.²⁸ The only thing that ultimately mattered regarding the Jesus of history, Bultmann said, was that Jesus *was* a historical figure. His existence was important for theology, but what he actually did was not important.²⁹ Though this may at first seem outlandish, Bultmann and many others reasoned that Christian theology had developed out of the ideas put forward by people who believed Jesus had risen from the dead: the Apostle Paul, to name a prominent example, had not known the man Jesus and, in his essential Christian teaching, Paul focuses primarily on the living Christ present in Christian community rather than on reports about things that the man Jesus said or did.

This lack of interest in the historical Jesus became a hallmark of theological study in many academic settings, but it was also characteristic of Christianity at a popular level. One of the most visible exponents of Protestant Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century was the American evangelist, Billy Graham. As a conservative Christian, Graham always insisted that all the stories about Jesus in the New Testament should be accepted as straightforward historical accounts. Still, in his preaching, Graham summoned individuals to be born again, to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus, to ask him to come into their hearts as their personal Lord and Savior. Thus, the focus of faith for Graham and his followers was the risen, spiritual Christ that the historically skeptical Bultmann also confessed. Although Graham (unlike Bultmann) would have insisted that Jesus really did do and say all the things reported of him in the Bible, the historicity of those biblical accounts seemed more important for his doctrine of scripture than for his understanding of the meaning and significance of Christ: such historicity may have been viewed as necessary to establish that the Bible was inerrant and literally true, but it would not have been necessary to establish that Christ lives in the hearts of born-again believers today.

According to one scholar's analysis, an emphasis on the benefits of Christ for modern humanity deflected interest in the specific, unrepeatable character of Jesus' historical life. For many Christians it would be "sufficient if Jesus had been born of a virgin (at any time in human history, and perhaps from any race), lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, and risen again three days later."³⁰ Granted this, the assurance of theologians that questions about the historical Jesus do not matter "formed an alliance with the fears of ordinary people as to what might happen to orthodox Christianity if history was scrutinized too closely."³¹

In any case, for half a century after Schweitzer, the quest for the historical Jesus was regarded as both methodologically impossible and theologically

unnecessary in certain prominent circles.³² Then, it took hold once again, initiated ironically enough by students of Rudolf Bultmann.

THE NEW QUEST MOVEMENT

On October 23, 1953, Ernst Käsemann gave a lecture on “The Problem of the Historical Jesus” to an alumni gathering of academics who, like him, had studied with Bultmann.³³ Rarely has a lecture been so influential. Käsemann argued that theology about Jesus must be thoroughly grounded in a historical reality or else the humanity of Jesus is lost and the Christian message becomes “docetic mythology.”³⁴ When that happens, Jesus can be used to support anything. Most likely, Käsemann and his German colleagues were particularly concerned about what had happened recently in their homeland, as Nazi leaders had presented Jesus (who historians know was Jewish!) as a proponent of anti-Semitism. Käsemann also affirmed that it is methodologically possible to discover historically reliable and potentially relevant information about Jesus in ways that transcend theological predilections. In part, he maintained this was now possible because of advances in the discipline that had been made in the years since Schweitzer’s book was published. Archaeology and related fields had greatly enhanced academic knowledge of the ancient world,³⁵ and refinement of methods for historical research had brought scholars closer to a consensus regarding the ground rules for such study. Käsemann, furthermore, did not project the writing of any more Lives of Jesus but simply advocated selective affirmation of what could be regarded as individual facts concerning Jesus. Historical scholars could determine whether specific sayings or deeds attributed to Jesus are likely to be authentic without engaging in speculation regarding the chronology or psychological motivations behind such matters.

James M. Robinson, another student of Bultmann who would become a prominent Jesus scholar, declared that Käsemann’s lecture had inaugurated a “new quest” for the historical Jesus.³⁶ In reality, this so-called new quest was just a matter of mainline Protestant scholars showing renewed interest in the discipline of historical Jesus studies that had been continuing without them all along. Nevertheless, the New Quest movement would prove to be highly significant. Scholars associated with that movement (often called New Questers) produced numerous historical studies of Jesus in the 1950s and 1960s. We will note two that have been especially influential.

Günther Bornkamm (1905–1990). As Professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Bornkamm published a volume exactly fifty years after Schweitzer’s tome that represented a fulfillment of what Käsemann wanted to see. It was called, simply, *Jesus of Nazareth*,³⁷ and for several decades it was widely used as a college textbook in both religious and secular settings. More than fifty years after its publication, Bornkamm’s *Jesus of Nazareth* would still be regarded as a work of monumental importance in Jesus scholarship.³⁸

Unlike his nineteenth-century predecessors, Bornkamm displayed almost no interest in chronology of events or in Jesus' motives, goals, or self-understanding. He developed a list of historically indisputable facts about Jesus, all derived from the first three Gospels: Jesus was a Jew from Nazareth, he was the son of a carpenter, he spoke Aramaic, he was baptized by John, and so forth. The real focus of Bornkamm's study, however, was on the message of Jesus, which he described in essence as "making the reality of God present."³⁹ The kingdom of God, Bornkamm claimed, had both a future and a present dimension for Jesus. The latter is brought out in many of his parables and in the significance of such customs as dining with outcasts. As a teacher, furthermore, Jesus challenged traditional interpretations of the law in favor of a new radical way of life that he held to be the will of God. That he could do this is an indication that he must have been a person of extraordinary authority. This is also evident from his calling of disciples and from the miracle stories that, though largely legendary, reveal the degree of authority attributed to him by his contemporaries. A historian can also affirm that Jesus was crucified and, further, may reasonably conjecture that this was because his provocative processional entrance to Jerusalem and act of overturning tables in the temple were perceived as threats to the religious and social order.

Norman Perrin (1920–1976). Perrin taught New Testament at the University of Chicago Divinity School and, along with James Robinson, was one of the first American scholars to achieve prominence in the field of historical Jesus studies (though, by the end of the twentieth century, that field would seem to be dominated by Americans). Notably, Perrin was not a student of Rudolf Bultmann, but a student of Joachim Jeremias, a scholar who also did significant work on the historical Jesus that is not usually associated with the New Quest movement.⁴⁰ But Perrin was influenced by both Bultmann and Käsemann and became the definitive apologist for what is called the criterion of dissimilarity (see pages 63–65). In 1967, he published a volume called *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, followed a decade later by *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*. In these books, Perrin applied the discipline of redaction criticism to sayings of Jesus recorded in the first three Gospels to determine which of them were historically authentic. The method of redaction criticism (a mainstay of Bornkamm's work also) attempts to distinguish material that would have reflected Jesus' own thinking from that which appears to reflect the aims of the Christians who compiled and edited (redacted) the Gospels. Perrin helped to define many of the criteria for historical judgments that we will review in our next chapter. His own preference was to err on the side of caution: "the nature of the synoptic tradition is such that the burden of proof will be upon the claim to authenticity."⁴¹ This philosophy came to be expressed through the popular motto "When in doubt, discard," meaning that nothing will be affirmed as authentic unless it is absolutely certain. Thus, Perrin was able to claim that, while a great deal of the Gospel material about Jesus' teaching is *possibly* authentic, the strictest canons of historical research allow us to affirm only selected items as an "irreducible minimum" (see fig. 2).⁴²

**Figure 2. Norman Perrin's
"Irreducible Minimum" List of Authentic Sayings**

1. Kingdom Sayings

the kingdom has come:	Luke 11:20
the kingdom is among you:	Luke 17:20–21
the kingdom suffers violence:	Matt. 11:12

2. The Lord's Prayer: Luke 11:2–4

3. Proverbial Sayings

binding the strong man:	Mark 3:27
a kingdom divided:	Mark 3:24–26
those who want to save their life:	Mark 8:35
a hand to the plow:	Luke 9:62
wealth and the kingdom:	Mark 10:23b, 25
let the dead bury the dead:	Luke 9:60a
the narrow gate:	Matt. 7:13–14
the first will be last:	Mark 10:31
what truly defiles:	Mark 7:15
receiving the kingdom as a child:	Mark 10:15 (compare 16:15)
turning the other cheek:	Matt. 5:39b–41
love your enemies:	Matt. 5:44–48

4. Parables

hidden treasure and pearl:	Matt. 13:44–46
lost sheep, coin, son:	Luke 15:3–32
great supper:	Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:16–24; Thomas 92:10–35
unjust steward:	Luke 16:1–9
workers in the vineyard:	Luke 15:3–32
two sons:	Matt. 21:28–32
children in the marketplace:	Matt. 11:16–19
Pharisee and tax collector:	Luke 18:9–14
good Samaritan:	Luke 10:29–37
unmerciful servant:	Matt. 18:23–35
tower builder and king going to war:	Luke 14:28–32
friend at midnight:	Luke 11:5–8
unjust judge:	Luke 18:1–8
leaven:	Luke 13:20–21; Thomas 97:2–6
mustard seed:	Mark 4:30–32; Thomas 85:15–19
seed growing by itself:	Mark 4:26–29; Thomas 85:15–19
sower:	Mark 4:3–8; Thomas 82:3–13
wicked tenants:	Mark 12:1–12; Thomas 93:1–18

Perrin claims that more material attributed to Jesus is likely to be historical, but this is a rock-bottom list of what "competent scholarly opinion would recognize as authentic."

As the examples of Bornkamm and Perrin indicate, the New Questers tended to emphasize the teaching of Jesus over his deeds. Skepticism regarding the historicity of miracles and supernatural events remained, a legacy from the Enlightenment. Most of their studies also downplayed uniquely Jewish attributes of Jesus. In addition, they tended to discount any attribution of imminent eschatology to Jesus, preferring to interpret Jesus' sayings about the kingdom of God symbolically (Bornkamm said that the "making-present of the reality of God signifies the end of the world in which it takes place"⁴³). In some ways, the work of the New Quest seemed to come full circle, defying Schweitzer to affirm (with more rigorous methodology) the nonapocalyptic, generically ethnic portrait of Jesus that he had critiqued.

Contributions of the New Quest were deliberately spotty, evaluating each individual tradition on its own merits rather than considering the whole corpus of material in light of some grand hypothesis. The New Questers sought to obtain isolated insights regarding the historical figure of Jesus rather than to construct full biographies concerning him. And, regardless of whether they subscribed to Perrin's motto, most of the New Questers required even greater evidence of certainty for what they affirmed than would usually be expected for historical research in the secular academy. This scaled-back version of the quest paid off, earning a new level of academic respect for the discipline. After the initial landmark publications, however, attention to the matter quieted down. Articles and seminar papers continued to be published, but the overall sense was that, save for some fine tuning, what could be done had been accomplished. Then, suddenly, in the last decade before the turn of the millennium, a veritable explosion of Jesus scholarship revealed the topic to be hotter than ever. Those studies, and the renaissance of Jesus scholarship that continues to the present day, will be the main focus of this book.

THIRD QUEST?

The abundance of Jesus studies produced in the late twentieth century made apparent what had been true all along: the New Quest movement was not the only game in town. Accordingly, a prominent scholar named N. T. Wright coined the term *Third Quest* to refer to one particular type of historical Jesus-research that he thought should be distinguished from the New Quest studies: Third Quest studies were, by definition, ones that regarded Jesus as an eschatological prophet and that emphasized his location in first-century Palestinian Judaism.⁴⁴ Thus, in Wright's view, the Third Quest and the New Quest coexisted, as the two major streams of research in his day (though, of course, some studies would not have belonged to either the New Quest or the Third Quest movements).

The use of this term, however, would prove problematic.⁴⁵ First, many nonspecialists (and even a few Jesus scholars) applied the labels New Quest

and Third Quest chronologically to describe successive phases in the history of the discipline (often with the attendant assumption that the latest phase was superior to its predecessor).⁴⁶ Thus, when Wright would claim that Crossan was not a Third Quest scholar but a New Quest scholar,⁴⁷ many would miss his nuance of definition and assume he meant Crossan was out-of-date, continuing to advance the outmoded scholarship of a previous generation—and even those who knew what Wright meant often suspected this was his “sub-text.”⁴⁸ Such rhetorical use of labels was nothing new: a few decades earlier Ernst Käsemann had sought to disparage the work of Joachim Jeremias by claiming it belonged to “the Old Quest” rather than to the New Quest (which he had just inaugurated).⁴⁹

Even when the terms “New Quest” and “Third Quest” were employed as Wright intended, the lines for categorization tended to get fuzzy. Supposedly, the “Third Quest” focuses on a Jesus who is thoroughly Jewish and who functioned as an eschatological prophet. But there has never been a recognized Jesus scholar who did not think that he or she was faithfully acknowledging Jesus’ identity as a first-century Jewish man—at issue is the perception of what Jewish identity entailed at that place and time. Likewise, virtually all scholars grant that Jesus used what some people would call “eschatological language” in a manner that some people might regard as “prophetic”—but much depends on definitions of those terms.

The biggest problem of all, however, may lie in the tendency for such markers (Old, New, Third Quests) to be taken as indicating that advancements in the field (or simply adoptions of new paradigms) render the work of previous generations (or of scholars using alternative paradigms) unworthy of engagement. Indeed, James Robinson once declared, “a new quest must naturally begin with the point at which the original quest was seen to be illegitimate.”⁵⁰ Such a construal has inevitably led to neglect and ignorance of the history of interpretation. Even scholars working in the field of Jesus research are sometimes unaware of the legitimate contributions and enduring insights embedded in the work of previous centuries. A lesson here may be drawn from Albert Schweitzer’s comments regarding the fourteen-hundred page book of David Strauss. Schweitzer ultimately found that book to be short-sighted, but he thought its chief virtue was that it completely destroyed the rationalizing explanations for miracle stories put forward by scholars like Paulus. If such ideas “continue to haunt present-day theology,” said Schweitzer, “it is only as ghosts, which can be put to flight simply by pronouncing the name of David Friedrich Strauss, and which would long ago have ceased to walk if the theologians who regard Strauss’ book as obsolete would only take the trouble to read it.”⁵¹ Such was the regard Schweitzer had for a very long, ultimately short-sighted book that was already eighty years old. And such is the regard that the most significant Jesus scholars today would have for Schweitzer *and* Strauss *and* Paulus . . . and countless others besides.

In terms of nomenclature, students and other novices in the field of Jesus studies should be aware that terms like *New Quest* and *Third Quest* have been

used by various scholars (though not always with the same sense or meaning); these terms will be encountered in much of the literature. Still, the strong tendency in Jesus scholarship today is to regard such labels as simplistic, inaccurate, and unnecessary. There is *a* quest for the historical Jesus, and it has been going on with diverse (but not easily or helpfully categorized) expressions for more than two hundred years. In the latter half of the twentieth century, many Jesus scholars wanted to be known as part of something new (a current “cutting edge” approach to Jesus unlike supposedly failed quests of the past). The new millennium, however, would prove to be an era in which Jesus scholars were prone to *connect* their work with past research. The history of the discipline came to be viewed not as a fitful chronicle of stops and starts but as a progressive process of often insightful exploration. Most contemporary Jesus scholars embrace that history without feeling the need to define themselves over against it.⁵²

HOW DID JESUS GET LOST?

The Gospel of Luke relates a rather charming story of how Jesus at age twelve was separated from his parents when his family visited Jerusalem. His parents sought diligently for him, finding him at last in the Jewish temple (Luke 2:41–51). In a corresponding fashion, some scholars aver that the Jesus of history got lost—not in the Jewish temple but in the Christian church. This claim has formed the background for much of the Jesus scholarship mentioned above and discussed below.

Even traditional Christians will sometimes complain that doctrines and dogmas developed by churches over the years can obscure the image of Jesus. They want to get back to the Jesus of the Bible, to see him as he is there, apart from religious trappings that have made him serve various interests. Some Jesus scholars have taken this a step further. The Jesus of the Bible also needs to be freed from such trappings, since by the time the Gospels were written the development of Christian doctrine and dogma was already well under way.

We will say more about what it means for Jesus to have gotten “lost in the Christian church” in a moment, but first a word is in order about the basic fallibility of human memory. Most scholars believe that the New Testament Gospels were written thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. Stories about him—and summaries of his teaching—would have been passed on orally during that period, but historians must question how well things would have been remembered and how accurately they would have been recounted. Dale Allison, a prominent Jesus historian, says, “Even were one to hold, as I do not, that eyewitness or companions of eyewitnesses composed the canonical Gospels, our critical work would remain. Personal reminiscence is neither innocent nor objective.”⁵³

The cause for Allison’s concern derives from scientific studies on the nature of human memory. At the simplest level, memory seeks to impose

order on the chaos of reality: the human brain facilitates memory by organizing data according to meaningful patterns. Thus, events might be remembered in a different temporal sequence than they actually occurred if such a sequence seems more sensible and makes the events easier to recall. Likewise, since stories are fairly easy to remember, the brain tends to regard history as though it were a coherent narrative: there is strong incentive for events to be remembered as having a neat beginning, a coherent middle, and a satisfactory resolution. In the same vein, historical people can be remembered as though they were stereotypical characters in a drama (e.g., as protagonists or antagonists, heroes or villains).⁵⁴ Indeed, the mental process of remembrance is closely linked to that of imagination: it is “reconstructive as well as reproductive.”⁵⁵ Allison notes:

Remembering is not like reading a book but rather like writing a book. If there are blanks, we fill them in. If the plot is thin, we fill it out. As we constantly revise our memoirs, we may well recollect what we assume was the case rather than what was in fact the case; and as we confuse thought with deed, we may suppose that we did something that we only entertained doing. In addition, we often mingle related or repeated events, so the memory of a single occurrence is often composite, a “synthesis of experiences.”⁵⁶

The point of these observations is not just that memory is fallible but that it is *selectively* fallible. Allison maintains that modern studies on memory reveal that memories are basically “a function of self-interest.”⁵⁷ Humans can remember things that never happened, when it serves their interest to do so. And this is even more true for communal memories: “Groups do not rehearse competing memories that fail to shore up what they hold dear.”⁵⁸ Communities that pass on more or less sacred traditions preserve approved memories only; unapproved memories are either selectively omitted or altered so as to obtain approval. Even well-intentioned people who have no conscious desire of getting anything wrong are subject to the subconscious limitations of their own mental processes. Thus, Allison concludes, even in the best-case scenario (assuming the Gospel authors intended to report what was historically accurate), we must recognize that the memories of Jesus recounted in the Gospels could often be “dim or muddled or just plain wrong.”⁵⁹

Of course, many scholars have more confidence in the Gospel materials than Allison thinks is warranted. Some would maintain that quite a bit of material was put into writing early on or that Jesus’ disciples (and their followers) were trained in the art of memorization to ensure almost verbatim recollection of what their master had said.⁶⁰ At the other end of the spectrum, however, there would be many scholars who suspect the process was actually less concerned with historical accuracy than the already problematic “best-case scenario” described above would allow. We will now look briefly at the work of three scholars who think the Jesus of history was transformed somewhat radically to serve the political and theological interests of the developing Christian religion. Their studies

are controversial but, whatever one makes of them, they offer a background for historical research on Jesus. If these scholars are right, then the work of historical reconstruction becomes absolutely essential for anyone who wants to know the truth about Jesus. If they are wrong, then only the work of historical reconstruction will reveal their errors.

WILLIAM WREDE

Five years before Schweitzer's book on the quest for the historical Jesus was published, a New Testament scholar at the University of Breslau in Silesia (now Poland) produced a volume on the Gospel of Mark that remains one of the twentieth century's most influential works. Called *The Messianic Secret* (1901), the volume analyzed what by any account is one of the most peculiar features in Mark's work: a propensity for Jesus to keep his identity as Messiah a secret. In Mark, Jesus silences demons because they know who he is and might make him known (1:23–25, 34; 3:11–12). He tells those who benefit from his miracles not to say anything to anyone about what he has done for them (1:43–44; 5:43; 7:36; compare 9:9). He describes his teaching about the kingdom of God as a mystery (4:11) and claims that he teaches in parables to prevent people for whom the message is not intended from understanding. When Peter identifies him as the Messiah, he rebukes his disciples, ordering them not to tell anyone about him (8:30). Scholars had long noted this theme and tried to explain it in various ways, such as that Jesus had to be circumspect about his claims to avoid being arrested too soon or to avoid being accosted by unmanageable crowds (see 1:45). But these explanations were never completely satisfying, and in 1901, William Wrede offered a solution that did seem to make sense—with disturbing implications.

Basically, Wrede proposed that the motif was a theological construction developed by Mark himself. That, in itself, was novel. And the reason Mark had developed such a theme was to promote his own Christology. What Wrede intimates (without saying in so many words) is that Mark invented the scheme of a "messianic secret" to facilitate a presentation of Jesus that was not historically accurate. Mark wanted to describe a messianic life, but memories of the actual nonmessianic life were still so fresh that he could not do this without maintaining that what he wrote about Jesus was a secret known only to a few. The problem apparently arose from the fact that Mark's Gospel was the earliest one to be written, and at the time of its writing some people who knew Jesus were probably still alive. What if they were to hear about what Mark had written and protest, "Wait a minute! I was there and I don't remember Jesus ever working all these miracles or claiming to be the Messiah"? Mark could respond, "He did say and do these things, but they were a secret. You were not among those privileged to know about them."

Wrede's thesis was actually much more profound than this description may indicate, and his arguments struck many at the time as persuasive. Even so, most

New Testament scholars today would view the secrecy motif as a literary device intended to further some theological or pastoral point rather than to facilitate deception.⁶¹ Wrede seems to have regarded Mark as unnecessarily devious, and his assumption that Mark would be so concerned about historical credibility may be anachronistic. Most likely, Mark's readers already knew the stories that the Gospel relates and did not have to be convinced that these things happened. Still, Wrede introduced a suspicion that the earliest Gospel—the one historians regard as most reliable—might in fact be a fabrication, an account created by an author whose agenda was not simply to report the facts. Long after the specifics of Wrede's provocative thesis fell out of favor, the suspicions it engendered remained. Among historians, at least, the Gospels were never read in quite the same way again.

BURTON MACK

If we flash forward some ninety years from the work of Wrede, we discover not too dissimilar views being expounded—for different reasons—by Markan scholars of the modern era. One of the most visible of these has been Burton Mack, professor emeritus of New Testament at the School of Theology in Claremont, California. His influential but controversial book *A Myth of Innocence* lays out a process for how the historical Jesus was transformed by early Christians into a very different figure who was to be the object of faith.⁶² Mack finds evidence within the New Testament for two competing strains.⁶³ The first is the Jesus movement, whose adherents “kept the memory of Jesus alive and thought of themselves in terms of Jewish reform,”⁶⁴ and the second is the Christ cult, in which Jesus became “the Lord of a new religious society that called for abrogation of the past.”⁶⁵

The Jesus movement, composed initially of Jesus' own followers, attempted to proselytize their Jewish neighbors by spreading their master's teachings, but they were largely unsuccessful. Meanwhile, in northern Syria and across the Mediterranean basin, adherents of the Christ cult—Paul and others who had never actually known Jesus—had great success developing a religion loosely based on this same figure. In this non-Jewish, Greco-Roman environment, the notions of resurrection and ascension were first applied to Jesus. A ritual meal to facilitate social formation was introduced and invested with sacral meaning. A new notion of conversion as personal transformation emerged. The new religion had wide appeal to Gentiles, as “Jesus came to be imagined as the patron deity of a new religion on the model of the Hellenistic cults.”⁶⁶ But as Jesus became a divine being, the historical image of Jesus as a simple sage was largely erased.

As a second-generation Christian, Mark drew on the traditions of both strains identified above to create a “foundation myth” that would serve the needs of his specific social situation. The Jesus movement had essentially run its course by now, bequeathing to Mark a legacy of confusion over mission, hostility toward Jewish opponents, and a desire to withdraw from the world. The Christ cult

was thriving but had become almost completely divorced from any narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. Mark's accomplishment was to retell the story of Jesus in light of these developments, for the benefit of the beleaguered remnants of the Jesus movement, but also from a perspective informed by the Christ cult. The Markan Jesus is a contentious rabbi who bests his Pharisaic opponents at debate. He is an authoritative Son of God who overcomes evil spirits and works fantastic miracles. He is the apocalyptic Son of Man who announces the imminent end of the world and founds a sect composed of those privileged to know the secret of the coming kingdom. And he is the innocent redeemer whose death provides atonement for those who believe in him. All these images made sense in Mark's social setting but none of them, says Mack, has much to do with the Jesus of history.

Most of Mark's Gospel, then, is fiction. The stories of Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees were crafted to address arguments between early Christians and their Jewish opponents. (Mack questions whether there were many Pharisees in Galilee in Jesus' day and doubts whether Jesus ever had any significant contact with them.) The miracle stories were designed to present Jesus as a semi-divine figure, on a par (at least) with other Hellenistic wonder workers. (Mack does not think that Jesus worked miracles or that he was even said to work miracles during his own lifetime.) Above all, the passion narrative was created to provide a myth to accompany the Christ cult's representation of Jesus' significance as "the innocent redeemer of the world." Of course, Mark had access to some early sources and oral traditions concerning Jesus, but he was also highly creative. Much of the time, he just made things up. With regard to the passion narrative, only the actual fact of crucifixion can be regarded as historical. Beyond this, only the account of the meal (the Last Supper) appears to have been present in pre-Markan tradition. The rest—the cleansing of the temple, the betrayal by Judas, the arrest at Gethsemane, the three denials by Peter, the trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, the mocking of Jesus, the crowning with thorns, the consignment of Simon to carry the cross, the darkness at noon, the division of Jesus' garments, the cry of dereliction ("Why have you forsaken me?"), the rending of the temple veil—all come from the creative mind of Mark:

Mark's Gospel was not the product of divine revelation. It was not a pious transmission of revered tradition. It was composed at a desk in a scholar's study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals . . . The story was a new myth of origins. A brilliant appearance of the man of power, destroyed by those in league against God, pointed nonetheless to a final victory when those who knew the secret of his kingdom would finally be vindicated for accepting his authority.⁶⁷

Mark created this story for the benefit of his little apocalyptic sect, a group that had little need for a simple sage but craved the approval of a god who would shortly bring this cruel world to an end in a way that would vindicate them and

them alone. Mack suggests that the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE may have been the cataclysmic event that sealed this sect's view of reality. Their Jewish enemies had been punished by God in a way that could only signal the ultimate end of all things. Thus, the message of Jesus concerning how to live in this world was exchanged for a mythology that condemns the world and defers real life to a realm beyond death. Mark "gave up on imagining a society fit for the real world."⁶⁸

One implication of Mack's theory of Christian origins is that the New Testament offers very little that can be deemed historically authentic with regard to Jesus. Mack does not regard as historical events any number of occurrences for which the earliest witness is the Gospel of Mark: that Jesus was baptized by John, that he opposed or in some way demonstrated against practices in the temple, that he practiced or attempted to practice works of healing or exorcism. All that we have, basically, are a few scattered sayings that represent Jesus' teaching and depict him as a sort of wandering philosopher. This, Mack thinks, should be enough: "Jesus ought to be ranked among the creative minds of the Greco-Roman age. . . . His importance as a thinker and a teacher can certainly be granted, and even greatly enhanced once we allow the thought that Jesus was not a god incarnate but a real historical person."⁶⁹

Apocalyptic sects come and go, says Mack, but this one produced a work that became the foundational document for one of the world's major religions. Mark's fictional account of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection was taken up by the other Gospel writers and came to be regarded as narrative history, indeed as sacred scripture. The myth was relatively harmless when it functioned to empower an oppressed minority struggling to hold their own on the edge of the empire. But eventually the myth became the charter for the official religion of the empire with disastrous consequences. In a broad sense, Mack thinks the crusades, the Holocaust, colonial imperialism, even the Vietnam War can be blamed on the Gospel of Mark, as societies informed by this mythology have decided their destiny is to assume the role of innocent redeemer of the world: "the Markan myth is no longer good news."⁷⁰ Mack concludes the main text of his book with these words: "The church canonized a remarkably pitiful moment of early Christian condemnation of the world. Thus the world now stands condemned. It is enough. A future for the world can hardly be imagined any longer, if its redemption rests in the hands of Mark's innocent son of God."⁷¹

Criticisms of Mack's daring thesis abound. His work is often regarded as speculative, lacking the kind of support from what historians would usually regard as evidence. He has been said to approach the story of Jesus the way filmmaker Oliver Stone approached such subjects as the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War, rejecting any authoritative or official version of events if any possible motive can be posited for the creation of such an account.⁷² Specifically, his assumption that diverse social groups must stand behind the different forms of biblical material and his attempts to date accounts on the basis of their perceived relationship to the process of social formation often seem arbitrary. Critics also

think he sets up false alternatives. “Casting out demons is difficult to imagine for one adept at telling parables,”⁷³ Mack asserts, insisting that Jesus must have either been an exorcist or a teacher who taught in parables, but not both. Likewise, Mack assumes that either the wisdom sayings or the eschatological pronouncements of doom that are attributed to Jesus must be deemed unauthentic because the same person would not have said both.⁷⁴ But, some scholars object; aren’t historical figures sometimes more complex than Mack wants to allow? Further, Mack’s proposal has been said to be “weakened by a rigid dichotomy between historical report and literary fiction,” genres that need not be mutually exclusive.⁷⁵

Another common critique is that Mack’s thesis rests on a minimalist portrait of Jesus that simply leaves too many gaps to be credible. Perhaps the most significant of these gaps is the motivation for Jesus’ crucifixion. If the controversy stories and the passion narrative are all to be regarded as fiction, if Jesus was essentially just a philosopher who talked about an alternative way of life, then why would anyone want to kill him? More to the point, why did the *government* want to kill him? Why was he crucified? The best answer Mack was able to propose was that Jesus’ death might have simply been “accidental.” This led to a flurry of jokes among scholars, such as one about Mack’s Jesus being killed in a car crash on the Los Angeles freeway.⁷⁶ What Mack meant, of course, was that Jesus could have just been caught up in the Roman pogroms against the Jews, especially if he looked or sounded at all unconventional. In this view there is no need to suppose that his death had any particular meaning or, for that matter, that it had anything to do with his beliefs or teaching.

Mack himself admits that *A Myth of Innocence* “is an essay, not a monograph.”⁷⁷ It lacks the sort of detailed argumentation and scholarly documentation that build an airtight case point by point. It seeks, rather, to propose a different way of viewing the whole matter of Christian origins by suggesting a way that makes “social sense” of the materials at hand. Mack does not prove that the church *did* come quickly (before the writing of the Gospels) to view Jesus as something very different from who he actually was historically, but for some scholars his work has described a plausible process of development that explains how the church *could* have done that. It has been enough to keep alive the sort of suspicions that Wrede introduced almost a century previous.

ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

Doubt regarding the historical accuracy of the Gospels has also been brought from another quarter, namely, feminist theologians who argue that a male-dominated church shaped the story of Jesus in ways that represented its own sexist perspective. Preeminent among these scholars is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose book *In Memory of Her* presents a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins.⁷⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza uses models drawn from sociology of religion to reconstruct the social reality that lies behind the androcentric

biblical texts. The reality that comes to the fore is a movement initiated by Jesus that defied the hierarchical structure of patriarchal society. In Schüssler Fiorenza's view, Jesus denounced the Jewish social system based on purity and holiness, which correlated well with masculine dominance, in favor of another stream of Jewish consciousness, that of the wisdom tradition evident in the deuterocanonical book of Judith. He also attacked the patriarchal family system by insisting that no one except God should be vested with the authority given to a father (see Matt. 23:9). Instead, Jesus encouraged a "discipleship of equals," creating an alternative community structure based on "a vision of inclusive wholeness." Women were especially prominent in this community, as were other frequently disenfranchised people such as the poor, the sick, and those considered to be outcasts because of their occupation or behavior. In fact, Schüssler Fiorenza theorizes, Jesus understood himself to be the representative of divine wisdom (see Luke 7:35), which is personified in the Old Testament as a woman (for example, in Prov. 1–9). Schüssler Fiorenza calls this woman "Sophia" (which means "wisdom") and suggests that Jesus encouraged people to worship God as Sophia.⁷⁹ He thought of himself as the child or prophet of Sophia and so, even though he was biologically male, Jesus came to be viewed by his earliest followers as the incarnation of the female principle of God.⁸⁰

What is most pertinent for our concern is that Schüssler Fiorenza alleges that the egalitarian aspect of Jesus' message and ministry did not comport with the political agendas of the emerging church. For example, his idea that men and women should have equal status and roles was particularly troublesome as the church tried to establish its place in a patriarchal society. Thus, the church introduced the notion that Jesus had appointed twelve male disciples to occupy a position of leadership over the rest.

The New Testament Gospels, Schüssler Fiorenza contends, must be studied with a "hermeneutics of suspicion," that is, with a strategy that involves recognition that they were written, edited, and preserved by men. Indeed, they were produced by men in communities dedicated to the subjugation of women—that much is clear from other New Testament writings (1 Cor. 14:34–35; 1 Tim. 2:11–15). Early on, there may have been some considerable controversy in the church over such matters: the mere fact that some NT writers are adamant about restricting roles for women implies that others in the church must have favored expanding those roles. Still, church history makes clear who "the winners" were in this debate. By the second century the Christian church had become an extremely patriarchal institution, dominated by an all-male clergy. As every critical scholar knows, history is usually written from the perspective of winners, who naturally relate matters in ways that reflect their own agenda. This, Schüssler Fiorenza says, is what happened with the Gospels. They offer an androcentric description of what was in reality far more egalitarian.

Schüssler Fiorenza's view is criticized by people who think she is trying to modernize Jesus, to turn him into an exponent of contemporary thinking that

may be politically correct today but would have been anachronistic for his own place and time. On the one hand, she is sometimes said to exaggerate the patriarchal character of first-century Judaism;⁸¹ on the other, she is said to overestimate the egalitarianism of Jesus in a manner based more on wishful thinking than solid historical evidence.⁸² Nevertheless, the identification of Jesus as incarnate Wisdom is also a prominent part of Ben Witherington's portrait of Jesus,⁸³ and the emphasis on the egalitarian aspect of the Jesus movement figures strongly in the work of John Dominic Crossan. Most of all, Schüssler Fiorenza has been extremely successful in sensitizing modern scholars to an awareness of the social and political context in which the Gospels were produced and to consideration of ways in which this might have influenced the stories they relate. We may note that her evaluation of these writings is by no means as negative as that of Wrede or Mack; she allows for far more of the Gospel material to be accepted as historical than they do. She is also careful to distinguish between the historical Jesus and what she calls "the Jesus of piety." As a Roman Catholic, she urges Catholic Christians to take historical reconstructions of Jesus seriously, but not to allow them to be the sole norm or source for Christian identity. Interpretations of Jesus in the lives of saints, in scripture, and in liturgy all contribute to the image of Jesus that she favors.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

As we end this chapter, let me reiterate that many historians who study Jesus have much more respect for the historical reliability of the New Testament Gospels than these whom we have just mentioned. I call attention to the works of Wrede, Mack, and Schüssler Fiorenza not because they are representative of the scholarly guild as a whole but because they exemplify the challenges that all historians must take into consideration if they want their work to be taken seriously. It will no longer do in most academic settings to summarize what the Gospels say about Jesus and present this as a historical record. The historical Jesus could have gotten lost somewhere in the theology and politics of the church before those Gospels were written. Whether he did or not is one of the questions historians hope to answer. The story in Luke's Gospel tells of Mary and Joseph seeking diligently only to discover that Jesus had never really been lost in the first place (Luke 2:41–51). That might, of course, turn out to be the case here as well. Eventually, we shall hear from several scholars who have sought diligently for the historical Jesus and who think that they have now found him. They will, of course, let us know whether the search was necessary or whether the Jesus they discovered had been right there in the Gospels and in the church all along.

Jaroslav Pelikan, longtime professor of history at Yale University, asked students to consider the following description: "There was a great teacher, and gathered around him was a small group of faithful followers. They listened to his

message and were transformed by it. But the message alienated the power structure of his time, which finally put him to death but did not succeed in eradicating his message, which is stronger now than ever.”

Then, Pelikan observed, “That description would apply equally to Jesus and Socrates. But nobody’s ever built a cathedral in honor of Socrates.”⁸⁵

Part of the historian’s task is to explain what there was about Jesus that inspired those cathedrals (and other types of churches) to be built.