

## THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The literature on the historical Jesus is typically divided into three categories: The Old Quest, The New Quest and the Third Quest respectively. While they are usually grouped in chronological periods, this is a simplification, but useful as an outline. There are hundreds of scholars who wrote on the life of Jesus. These selected and outlined below are recognized as primary contributors who represent various approaches to the subject.

The term “the historical Jesus” within the context of the “quests” means Jesus as he is reconstructed by historians using a certain set of interpretative tools or methods. Not all contributors to the “quests” are trying to discover the actual, historical life and teaching of Jesus. Most historians agree that history is not “objective” in the video camera sense. All history is an interpretation by someone of a historical experience.

### I. The Quest

**Reimarus** - This first phase begins in the Enlightenment period (which stressed reason over faith) in the person of the German skeptic H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768). His writings, published after his death, caused an uproar with their declaration that, early on in Christian preaching, there was a transition from the historical Jesus of Nazareth to a faith-constructed “Jesus the Christ” and that this transition was based on a deliberate lie. Christianity was not based on divine revelation, but on human failure and fraud. Furthermore, he sought to distinguish between the self-understanding and preaching of the historical Jesus and that which was fabricated by his followers.

For Reimarus Jesus was not divine, but a failed Jewish revolutionary. His disciples stole his body and began to fabricate “Jesus the Christ” -- a divine redeemer -- who fulfilled Jewish expectations, rose from the death and would appear a second time on the clouds of heaven to bring the world to an end. Paul and others “sold” this idea to a gullible ancient audience. The historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith were quite different.

**Lessing** - Gotthold Lessing (1729-81), who published Reimarus’ writings after his death, also came from an Enlightenment rationalist tradition. Unlike Reimarus, he did not value history, but rather reason. While the stories constructed by the Gospel writers, with their notions of divine incarnation, miracles and resurrection, may have been necessary to convey the message of Jesus in the first century, they were now to be replaced by reason.

Lessing made a distinction (much like Reimarus) between “the Christian religion” and “the religion of Christ”. The religion of Christ was actually a religion of reason common to all humanity with Jesus as a prime example and spokesman.

**Strauss** - David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) was not interested in history or in distinguishing the true “historical” Jesus from the mythical constructs of the early Church writers. He agreed that the divine, messiah Jesus was a mythical construct clothed in Old

Testament symbols. However, he was not so much interested in the “Christ event” as the “Christ idea”. This idea expressed in Christ was about the unity of the human and divine and for Strauss the unity of the human and divine is not to be restricted to Jesus, but actually the incarnation is taking place in the whole of humanity. This was an abiding truth that could be “rescued” from Jesus in an ahistorical way.

**Renan** - Ernest Renan (1823-92) introduced a romantic life of Christ in which Christ is presented as a great moral teacher who won the hearts of the people early in his ministry, but was later rejected by them because of his high moral demands. His life ended in failure, but his eternal message would continue throughout history even though the organized Church muted his message.

**Holtzmann** - H.J. Holtzmann (1832-1910) focused on the “synoptic problem” which has remained a prime focus for scholars to this day. Holtzman studied the relationship between Mark, Matthew and Luke -- their order of composition and mutual dependence - - and believed if the problem of their mutual relationships could be solved it would lead historians to the historical Jesus. He proposed that Mark was the earliest source and therefore was the best window to genuine history. Thus the gospels can yield information on the Jesus of history. Most scholars today also hold to the priority of Mark and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and other sources as a basis for their work.

**Weiss** - Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) added a new and important focus into the study of Jesus and his message. He proposed a more accurate understanding of a key element in the message of Jesus -- the Kingdom of God. In the liberal thought of the day (Ritschl, Harnak et. al.) the Kingdom of God was based on an interior conversion of the heart to a life of mutual fellowship with God and with humanity -- conforming to the current liberal ethic. Thus the Kingdom of God was an ethical community bound together by the kind of love exemplified in the life of Jesus.

Weiss rejected this idea. He held that the Kingdom of God in first century Judaism referred to an eschatological belief that God would, in the very near future, enter into history and bring the world to an end. Not the destruction of the world in some physical sense, but a new world under the reign of God. For Weiss the Kingdom of God was an “eschatological” message not simply an ethical message. This discussion continues today.

**Wrede** - William Wrede (1859-1906) wrote in the tradition of skeptics before him. Unlike Holtzman he held that the Gospel of Mark was largely a theological construct. For Wrede the only valid interpretation of Jesus was an eschatological one. However, the historical Jesus was lost in the mists of later theological constructions presented by the Church in the Gospels.

**Schweitzer** - Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) is certainly the most significant writer in the Old Quest tradition. In his 1906 book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* Schweitzer concluded that the major scholarly works on the life and message of Jesus were actually reconstructions by historians that reflected more of their own personal theological and historical theories

than the Jesus of history. This is not to deny that these writers had some real insights into the reality of Jesus which Schweitzer incorporated into his work.

However, for Schweitzer, the historical Jesus lies beyond our grasp. The efforts of Reimarus and the others were in vain. There can be no discovery of the historical Jesus in the modern biographical sense. The foundations of Christianity are spiritual, not historical. The eternal meaning of Jesus does not depend on the results of a historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus - which is in fact impossible to reconstruct. In *The Quest* he states:

The abiding and eternal in Jesus is absolutely independent of historical knowledge and can only be understood by contact with His spirit which is still at work in the world...Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time. (p. 399)

Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity. (p. 397)

So what can we say of Jesus? For Schweitzer, Jesus is primarily an eschatological or perhaps apocalyptic prophet. Jesus expected to play a central role the immanent coming of the eschatological Kingdom of God and the end of the world. Jesus saw his inevitable death in terms of the "trial", a period of suffering that Israel believed it would have to endure before the triumphant intervention of God in their history. But Jesus was wrong. He died in failure. The world did not end, the Kingdom did not come and he did not play a decisive role in its inauguration. Furthermore, the ethic preached by Jesus was intended to be a provisional or interim ethic until the arrival of the Kingdom as such it cannot be normative for us today. The liberal, this worldly, ethical Kingdom of God initiated by Jesus as proposed by the 19th century liberals never existed nor was ever intended by Jesus.

Like Reimarus, Schweitzer held that Jesus must be understood in his Jewish context, like Strauss he abstracted a timeless message from the vagaries of history. Like Weiss, the correct context for Jesus was that of an eschatological, apocalyptic expectation. And like many before him, Schweitzer held that even though the historical Jesus cannot be distilled in detailed biographical form from the Gospels, our understanding of him and his message which does emerge from an analysis of his historical context should be held up as a challenge to the "Jesus of the Churches" who is a construct reflecting their own cultural preferences and needs.

## **Reaction**

Before continuing to the next phase, most accounts pause for a moment to note the

theological reaction to the “Old Quest”. Many theologians and ministers reacted strongly and negatively to the Jesus presented by Schweitzer and his predecessors. This, they declared, was not the Jesus of faith, the Jesus worshiped in the churches. Unable to reconcile the “historical” Jesus of the scholars with their Jesus of faith, they simply left the historians to themselves and noted the divide between historical scholarship and faith.

Partly because of Schweitzer’s demolition of the quest for the historical Jesus and partly because of a new direction in European theology, the focus on Jesus faded. The details of his historical existence were now seen as irrelevant to theology. The two most important theologians who gave new direction to early 20th century theology were Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann.

**Barth** - Following the lead of Schweitzer, Karl Barth (1886-1968) also criticized the 19th century liberal “historical Jesus”. While certainly agreeing with Schweitzer that a “life of Jesus” could not be written, he went much further and stated that even the personality of Jesus, which Schweitzer stressed, could not be found in the sources. Most importantly he said that no matter what historians might discover of the historical Jesus, such historical data was of no interest whatever for theology. For Barth “the quest” was irrelevant.

While the earthly life of Jesus was not important, what was important was the biblical message, but not what was said then and there, but how it impacts us here and now. In his famous commentary on the Epistle to the Romans he said “my whole energy of interpreting has been expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit...If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours”. (preface to the 1st ed.) He wanted to break down the barrier between the first century and our own. The Word of God is the central focus of theology, but it must meet us in the concrete situations of today.

**Bultmann** - Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) dominated 20th century New Testament studies. Recalling Strauss, Bultmann had no interest in extracting the historical Jesus from the myths, culture and faith constructs of the first century. Bultmann’s main contributions are contained in two arguments:

1) A detailed analysis of the literary forms of the Synoptic Gospels indicate that they originated not in the life of Jesus, but originated in the life of the early church in response to their historical situations, questions and faith. These literary forms found in the Gospels include myth, legend, history, midrash, hymns, wisdom sayings and parables.

2) The Gospels are largely mythical and presuppose a prescientific worldview which Jesus and the early Church used to clothe a timeless message which we must now translate out of a mythical language into the language of existential decision. The Gospel message is a message directed to human existence, the historical details of its origin are not important.

From Bultmann we receive the language of Form Criticism and Demythologizing. Neither the history nor the personality of Jesus are of importance. Only “Jesus the

Christ”, the Jesus of faith, who addresses us in the preaching of the original message (kerygma) is the focus of our faith. Jesus becomes “alive” in the proclamation of his message insofar as what he proposed makes an existential demand on us. His truths are not timeless truths, but existential truths that confront us to make a personal decision. Objective history has no value, only history that draws us into a personal encounter. The only interpretation of the NT with any value, is an existential interpretation using the methods of form criticism and demythologizing.

And so for Bultmann the quest for the historical Jesus was judged a fruitless endeavor and in fact the Jesus of history, even if he could be reconstructed, could not be the foundation of Christianity.

## II. The New Quest

**Kasemann** - In 1953 Ernst Kasemann inaugurated the “New Quest” when he delivered a lecture arguing that though it is true that a historical “life of Jesus” cannot be written, scholars must be careful not to sever Christian faith from its historical roots. If Christianity does not refer back to the historical person of Jesus then we are left with a kind of Docetism (Jesus divine, not truly human) in which Jesus becomes a nonentity. Theological meaning must have a historical referent, i.e., a real Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century and died on a cross. Without this, Christian theology has no restraints because Jesus can be made anything we want him to be.

The method of this new quest focused more on the *sayings* of Jesus than his *deeds*. Criteria were employed to judge the degree of authenticity of the saying attributed to Jesus. These included: 1) Dissimilarity - the saying was unlike what was to be found in contemporary Jewish or early Church culture, 2) Multiple attestation - this occurs if the saying is found in more than one source (gospel), 3) Consistency - occurs when the content of the saying fits into the tone of other sayings already judged to be authentic, and 4) Linguistic and cultural tests - test to determine if the saying would actually fit into the culture of Jesus.

**Bornkamm** - G. Bornkamm was one of the first to publish in the era of the New Quest. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Bornkamm still followed Bultmann in ignoring the miraculous, judging that Jesus had no divine foreknowledge and used no Messianic titles of himself.

However, some significant changes were also evident. He presents Jesus as speaking of an eschatological fulfillment in the present, as opposed to the future. He suggested that the gospels do indeed provide some access to real historical events in the life of Jesus, however he still concentrated on the sayings of Jesus rather than the events of his life.

**Jeremias** - In his 1971 work, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias was committed to finding the Jesus behind the *kerygma* who can be the basis for Christian faith. Through his intimate knowledge of Aramaic and first century

Palestinian culture he was able to collect a good number of sayings of Jesus which he held to be authentic.

He also argued for a blend of imminent eschatology (the end time is soon - Schweitzer) and present or realized eschatology (the end time has already come - Dodd). In other words, he held that Jesus had taught that the Kingdom had in some sense already come in his time and in his person, but that there was also a future time when the Kingdom would be realized in its fullness. So for Jeremias eschatology or the realization of the Kingdom is a process (the mustard seed), present now, but with a fullness in the future.

**Schillebeeckx** - Edward Schillebeeckx, a Catholic priest, published a large work entitled: *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. This book breaks little new ground. He follows Bultmann in many ways, but his basic contention is that the Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ are one and the same person.

Much like Kasemann, he acknowledges that the early Church and the Gospel writers speak in the language of faith about Christ, but that this language refers back to an original experience of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Thus all statements of faith are based on historical memories of Jesus. Christian faith is faith in the person of Jesus Christ, this faith is in the glorified Christ of today, but it is also linked to the historical Jesus of whom we can catch a glimpse through the Gospel sources.

**The “Jesus Seminar”** - The Jesus Seminar, founded in 1985 by Robert Funk former executive secretary of the Society of Biblical Literature, is a self-selected group of American NT scholars (200 members, about 40 active) who meet regularly to focus on the sayings of Jesus and to determine the probability of whether or not these are authentic sayings of Jesus. While the group in no way represents the “best” in American NT scholarship, Robert Funk and his co-chairman John Dominic Crossan are highly reputable NT scholars.

Their method includes the use of all modern critical tools (form criticism, demythologizing, cross-cultural studies, etc.) and voting on the various sayings. Their sources include the canonical Gospels and noncanonical works such as the Gospel of St. Thomas.

Their purpose is to produce a history of the Synoptic tradition in the light of modern scholarship and to, in effect, create a “new Gospel” for our times that portrays a non-eschatological and “non-mythical” Jesus. This will help expose the fundamentalist Jesus of American Christianity as a fraud. In order to reach a wide public they make their findings public in such publications as Time and Newsweek.

Two of the most prominent Seminar scholars, Burton Mack and John Dominic Crossan have concluded that the person and message of Jesus are more in the style of the wandering Greek Cynic philosophers, than of a Jewish messiah announcing an apocalyptic coming of the Kingdom of God.

For Mack the Jewish strands in the Gospels are later additions by the early Church, while the earlier traditions place Jesus more in the tradition of the Greek Cynics. The Gospel of Mark is a fiction (echoes of Werde) which created a myth of Jesus' heroic life. The picture of Jesus in Mark as a wonder-worker and a messiah who would come a second time in glory to establish once and for all the Jewish Kingdom of God is largely a fictive addition.

Crossan's brilliant work, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, places Jesus in the Jewish peasant society of the first century Mediterranean world. Jesus is then described as a poor, wandering (Cynic) teacher who spends his time in "open table fellowship" with all comers and through his preaching challenges the existing social order calling for social justice. (thus many would place Crossan in the Third Quest). He founds no church and, constantly moving, does not intend to gather large communities of people together, but calls them to an individual relationship with God, an unmediated, "bokerless Kingdom of God".

Contrary to most scholarship, Crossan denies that the Synoptics give us most of our best information about Jesus, rather Crossan claims that the Gnostic Gospel of St. Thomas (discovered in 1945 in Egypt at Nag Hammadi) is not a later, secondary document, but is one of our earliest sources of equal and perhaps of greater value for reconstructing the teachings of Jesus.

Crossan also puts great stock in the "Q document". For years scholars have proposed that Matthew and Luke were based on Mark and a hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings labeled Q (from the German *quelle* meaning source). The Q document, if there is one, has never been found, but Crossan raised it to the status of a Gospel.

Thus Crossan's Jesus is presented as a Jewish peasant who looks like a cross between a Cynic and a Gnostic, promoting open table fellowship and preaching social justice. Most scholars judge Crossan's analysis to be a brilliant, but highly speculative reconstruction.

### **III. The Third Quest**

The Third Quest does not have a leading figure like Bultmann nor does it have any particular theological agenda or coordinating principle. However, it does have at least two important characteristics: 1) An attempt to place Jesus firmly into his first century Jewish context (anticipating Crossan and contra Bultmann). 2) A total treatment of Jesus including both his sayings and deeds. While using critical methods, the authors of the Third Quest also use secular documents of the 1st century (Josephus) to better describe the context of 1st century world of the Jew Jesus.

**Brandon** - S.G.F. Brandon's 1976 work *Jesus and the Zealots* is based on Schweitzer's theme that Jesus must be understood against the background of 1st century Judaism. However, while such a focus led Schweitzer to see Jesus as an apocalyptic figure proclaiming an imminent eschatological event, Brandon saw Jesus primarily as a Jewish revolutionary (Reimarus). This view has not been sustained by subsequent scholarship.

**Vermes** - G. Vermes, like Brandon, also attempted to place Jesus in his 1st century context in his 1973 work *Jesus the Jew*. His conclusion, however, was quite different. Vermes saw Jesus as a Jewish holy man (*hasid*). Vermes also had a theory about Jesus' use of the title Son Of Man. For Vermes, Jesus used this phrase to mean "I" or "me" and any statements of Jesus that could not be reduced to this were not sayings of Jesus.

**Meyer** - In 1979, B. F. Meyers published his book *The Aims of Jesus*. In this work he proposed that the most fruitful way to look at historical events and persons was to make a distinction between the "outside" and the "inside" of historical events. The "outside" is what happened, the "inside" is the motivation of the historical characters - why they did what they did.

For Meyer, the public acts of Jesus (table-fellowship with sinners and announcing the Kingdom) were the result of his self understanding as the founder of the long awaited messianic community - the reborn Israel with a renewed covenant and the forgiveness of sins. The Gospels relate this growing messianic self-understanding which was shared in private with his disciples. Thus this self-understanding explained by Jesus did what he did. After the death of Jesus the Church took upon itself the task of completing his mission. Therefore, contra Bultmann and others there is no sharp distinction between Jesus and the early Church.

**Harvey** - In the 1980 Bampton Lectures given in Oxford, Anthony Harvey gave a new twist to historical method. Harvey introduced the notion of "historical constraint". He argued that the actions of historical figures are significantly controlled by the constraints in any given historical situation. The elements of the historical situation would include language, politics, religious beliefs, etc.. Thus if we get an accurate picture of the historical situation we can make clearer judgments about the historical accuracy of reported events - e.g. the Gospel stories of Jesus.

From his analysis of 1st century Roman and Jewish practices, he concluded that the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus are substantially correct. He also argued that because of the strict monotheism of 1st century Judaism, Jesus might well be understood as a messiah - a divine agent-, but not a divine messiah.

**Borg** - M. J. Borg in his 1982 work *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* and his 1987 work *Jesus: A New Vision* shows his basic agreement with Vermes that Jesus was a Palestinian "holy man". In the preface of his 1994 work *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, he announces that "A third quest of the historical Jesus is underway, replacing the old quest of the nineteenth century and the short-lived 'new quest' of the late 1950's and early 1960's" (preface ix).

Borg's main contribution is to present a noneschatological interpretation of Jesus. He bases this conclusion on three observations: 1) sayings regarding the "coming of the Son of Man" do not go back to the historical Jesus and therefore cannot substantiate the claim that Jesus was an eschatological prophet, 2) the idea that the Kingdom of God involves

the imminent end of the world is without basis in the kingdom texts, 3) the Kingdom of God does not need to be conceived in the framework of the temporal paradigm of the present vs the future.

For Borg the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus is in no way a future event (end of the world), but the power of God present now. Jesus invites his hearers to repent, “enter the Kingdom” and have their lives renewed.

Borg also argues that Jesus is political, but not in the sense of a revolutionary, but actually as a traitor to the nationalistic hopes within the Jewish community. Jesus was a traitor because he introduced a call to mercy and love into a highly volatile political situation where mercy, forgiveness and love were not considered to be part of the solution to Roman domination. Jesus’ teaching indicated that he was warning that resistance by Israel would lead to social and military disaster as a result of divine judgment. The language of the eschatological passages thus refer to imminent national disaster.

**Sanders** - *Jesus and Judaism*, written in 1985 by E. P. Sanders, begins with a consideration of the Temple and the eschatological Jewish hope that a new Temple would be built in the coming new age of the reign of God. It was Jesus’ attack on the Temple, not to “cleanse” it, but to announce imminent judgment upon it because the entire system was corrupt, that resulted in the Jewish authorities giving over Jesus to the Romans (like Borg).

Sanders does not see Jesus as a political revolutionary due to the fact that his followers were not seen as dangerous enough to be rounded up and executed. Contra Borg, Sanders does not believe that Jesus was in opposition to the Pharisees, but that what the Gospels say of this reflect later troubles that the early Church experienced when they were expelled from the synagogues. Sanders also argues that the interpretation of the “Son of Man” is at this time without resolution.

Summary of the Third Quest - While the Third Quest does not provide many answers to the quest for the historical Jesus, many scholars feel that the lasting contribution of the Third Quest is that scholars are now asking the right questions. Here are a few:

- 1) What was the relationship of Jesus to the Judaism of his time, especially their hopes for the immediate future?
- 2) What were Jesus’ aims? What did he want people to do in response to his message?
- 3) Why did Jesus die?
- 4) Why did the early Church begin? Or what happened at Easter?
- 5) What indeed are the Gospels? What is their foundation?

These questions provide a solid direction for future studies of the historical Jesus. They

also imply that if you separate the Jesus of faith from the Jesus of history he can be freely manipulated by our imaginations and theological or political agendas.