MEMORIES OF JESUS
A Critical Appraisal of James D.G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered

ROBERT B. STEWART
& GARY R. HABERMAS
EDITORS
For my children, Ray, Bethany, and Rebekah, who brighten my life everyday

To my colleagues at Liberty University in the Department of Philosophy and Theology
Contributors vii

Preface xiii
Robert B. Stewart and Gary R. Habermas

Introduction xv
Robert B. Stewart and Gary R. Habermas

1. From Reimarus to Dunn: Situating James D. G. Dunn in the History of Jesus Research 1
Robert B. Stewart

2. Whose Memory? Whose Orality? A Conversation with James D. G. Dunn on Jesus and the Gospels 31
Markus Bockmuehl

3. Telling the Truth of History: A Response to James D. G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered 45
Scot McKnight

4. A New Perspective on the Jesus Tradition: Reflections on James D. G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered 59
Samuel Byrskog

5. Orality and the Parables: With Special Reference to James D. G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered 79
Craig L. Blomberg
6. Remarks on James D. G. Dunn’s Approach to Jesus Research  
   Jens Schröter  
   129

7. Jesus’ Dissimilarity from Second Temple Judaism and the Early Church  
   Craig A. Evans  
   145

8. The Transmission of the Remembered Jesus: Insights from Textual Criticism  
   Bill Warren  
   159

9. Why Not “Beginning from Bethlehem”? A Critique of James D. G. Dunn’s Treatment of the Synoptic Birth Narratives  
   Charles L. Quarles  
   173

10. “Christianity in the Making”: Oral Mystery or Eyewitness History?  
    Ben Witherington III  
    197

11. Remembering Jesus’ Self-Understanding: James D. G. Dunn on Jesus’ Sense of Role and Identity  
    Paul Rhodes Eddy  
    227

12. James D. G. Dunn on the Resurrection of Jesus  
    Stephen T. Davis  
    255

13. Remembering Jesus’ Resurrection: Responding to James D. G. Dunn  
    Gary R. Habermas  
    267

    James D. G. Dunn  
    287

Name Index  
   325

Subject Index  
   329

Scripture Index  
   332
Craig L. Blomberg (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is a Distinguished Professor of the New Testament at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado. He holds a BA from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, an MA from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and a PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He is the author of 12 books and has coauthored or coedited seven more, along with dozens of journal articles and chapters in multiauthor works. His books include three on the historical reliability and interpretation of the gospels (one specializing in John), two on interpreting and preaching the parables, three commentaries (on Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and James), a textbook on Jesus and the Gospels and another on Acts through Revelation, and two books on material possessions in the Bible.

Samuel Byrskog (ThD, Lund University) is a Professor of New Testament Studies at Lund University, Sweden. He has published several books and articles in the area of eyewitness testimony, tradition, memory, identity formation, and orality/scribality in early Christianity and its Greco-Jewish environment. His publications include *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Mohr Siebeck, 2000); and the first volume of a commentary on Romans (EFS-förlaget, 2006). He has recently edited *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Baylor University Press, 2009) with Werner Kelber.

Stephen T. Davis (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is the Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. His degrees are from Whitworth University (BA), Princeton Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the Claremont Graduate University (PhD in Philosophy). He writes mainly on the philosophy of religion and Christian theology and is the author or editor of some fifteen books, including *Encountering Evil* (John Knox Press, 1981); *Risen Indeed* (Eerdmans, 1993); *God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs* (Eerdmans, 1997); *The Trinity* (Oxford University Press, 2002); and *Christian Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

James D. G. Dunn (PhD, DD, University of Cambridge) is Emeritus Lightfoot Chair of Divinity at Durham University, where he taught for over 20 years until 2003, and a Methodist Local Preacher. He has authored more than 20 volumes, including *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Westminster John Knox, 1970); *Jesus and the Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1997); *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (3d ed.; SCM Press, 2006); *Christology in the Making* (2d ed.; Eerdmans, 2003); commentaries on Acts, Romans, Galatians, Colossians, and Philemon; *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Westminster John Knox, 1990); *The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism* (Trinity Press International, 1992); *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans, 2006); *The New Perspective on Paul* (Eerdmans, 2007); *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Baker, 2005); *New Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Abingdon, 2009); and the first two

**Paul Rhodes Eddy** (PhD, Marquette University) is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Teaching Pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul. He has authored, coauthored, or coedited a number of books, including *John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions* (Ashgate, 2002); *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Baker Academic, 2007); and *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (InterVarsity, 2009). He has also authored a number of articles and essays related to the historical study of Jesus.

**Craig A. Evans** (PhD, Claremont; DHabil., Budapest) is a Payzant Distinguished Professor of the New Testament at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia, Canada. He is the author of a number of books, including *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (Brill, 1995) and *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Baylor University Press, 2003). He is also the editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (Routledge, 2008). Professor Evans has appeared in many television documentaries concerned with Jesus and his world. His interests include the historical Jesus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and archaeology.

**Gary R. Habermas** (PhD, Michigan State University) is a Distinguished Research Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University. He has authored or coauthored 36 books (18 on the subject of Jesus’ resurrection) and contributed more than 65 chapters or articles to additional books. He has also written well over 100 articles of various sorts. He has frequently been a Visiting or Adjunct Professor, teaching over 40 courses at 15 graduate schools and seminaries during the last 15 years.

**Charles L. Quarles** (PhD, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary) is Vice President for the Integration of Faith and Learning, Chair of the Division of Christian Studies, and Research Professor of New Testament and Greek at Louisiana College. He has published scholarly articles in such journals as *New Testament Studies, Novum*
Memories of Jesus

Testamentum, Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus, Bulletin for Biblical Research, Catholic Biblical Quarterly, and many others. He is the editor or author of several books, including most recently Buried Hope or Risen Savior: The Search for the Jesus Tomb (B&H Academic, 2008) and the forthcoming book An Illustrated Life of Paul (B&H Academic). He is coauthor, with Andreas Köstenberger and Scott Kellum, of The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament (B&H Academic, 2009).

Scot McKnight (PhD, University of Nottingham) is a Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University in Chicago, Illinois. He is the author of more than 20 books, including The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others (Paraclete, 2004); Embracing Grace: A Gospel for All of Us (Paraclete, 2005); The Story of the Christ (Baker, 2006); A Light among the Gentiles (Fortress, 1992); A New Vision for Israel (Eerdmans, 1999); Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels (Baker, 1988); and he is a coeditor with J. B. Green and I. H. Marshall of the award-winning Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (IVP, 1992) as well as the coeditor, with J. D. G. Dunn, of The Historical Jesus in Current Study (Eisenbrauns, 2005).

Jens Schröter (PhD, Ruprecht-Karls University Heidelberg) is a Professor of New Testament exegesis and theology, including the New Testament Apocrypha, at the Humboldt University of Berlin. His Habilitation was at Humboldt University. Among his publications are Erinnerung an Jesu Worte. Studien zur Rezeption der Logienüberlieferung in Markus, Q und Thomas (Neukirchener Verlag, 1997); Jesus und die Anfänge der Christologie (Neukirchener Verlag, 2001); Das Abendmahl. Frühchristliche Deutungen und Impulse für die Gegenwart (Katholisches Bibelwerk Stuttgart, 2006); Jesus von Nazaret. Jude aus Galiläa—Retter der Welt (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig, 2006); and Von Jesus zum Neuen Testament. Studien zur urchristlichen Theologiegeschichte und zur Entstehung des neutestamentlichen Kanons (Mohr Siebeck, 2007). His main areas of academic interest are historical Jesus research, the Acts of the Apostles, theology of the New Testament, and early Christian Apocrypha.
Robert B. Stewart (MDiv, PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary where he is the Greer-Heard Professor of Faith and Culture. He is editor of The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue (Fortress, 2006); Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse in Dialogue (Fortress, 2007); and The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue (Fortress, 2008); and author of The Quest of the Hermeneutical Jesus: The Impact of Hermeneutics on the Jesus Research of John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright (University Press of America, 2008). A contributor to the Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity and the Revised Holman Bible Dictionary, he has published articles or chapters in numerous books.

Bill Warren (MDiv, PhD, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) is Professor of New Testament and Greek at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary where he holds the Landrum P. Leavell II chair of New Testament Studies. He is the founding director of the H. Milton Haggard Center for New Testament Textual Studies. He is the editor of La Teología de la Liberación: Una Respuesta Evangelica (SBTI Press, Cali, Colombia, 1990); translator of Introducción a la Crítica Textual (Cuba and Colombia, 2004); author of Luke: A Study Guide (Seminary Extension, 1997); and Senior Project Director and Editor for the CNTTS Textual Apparatus, an electronic textual apparatus for the Greek New Testament (OakTree Software, 2003 to present). A contributor to the Revised Holman Bible Dictionary, he has published articles and book reviews in numerous journals in both Spanish and English.

Ben Witherington III (MDiv, Gordon Conwell; PhD, University of Durham, UK) is Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and on the doctoral faculty at St. Andrews University in Scotland. Witherington has also taught at Ashland Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt University, Duke Divinity School, and Gordon-Conwell. He has written over 40 books, including Jesus the Sage and Jesus, Paul and the End of the World plus a host of commentaries. Two of his books, The Jesus Quest and The Paul Quest,
were selected as top biblical studies works by *Christianity Today*. He also writes for many church and scholarly publications and is a frequent contributor to the Beliefnet Web site. Along with many interviews on radio networks across the country, Witherington has been seen on the History Channel, NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, the Discovery Channel, A&E, and the PAX Network.
Life is full of strange truths: models want to be actors, athletes want to be musicians, actors want to be politicians—and philosophers want to be New Testament specialists. At least it seems that way to me (Stewart). Despite the fact that we are philosophers, not New Testament professors, for most of our academic careers we have been fascinated with historical Jesus studies. And we have noticed on numerous occasions that we frequently run into other philosophers at the professional meetings we have attended that deal with issues related to the historical Jesus. In fact, to the best of our recollection, we have never attended a session dealing with the historical Jesus at either the Society of Biblical Literature or the Evangelical Theological Society where several philosophers were not in attendance. But this should not really surprise us because Jesus is indeed the most interesting of men.

This book grew out of our fascination with Jesus. Both of us attended the Synoptic Gospel section of the 2005 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where James D. G. Dunn was the featured scholar. Dunn spoke on his book Jesus Remembered and then responded to a slate of papers critiquing the book. The time we invested was well spent. The discussion was witty and in-depth, and nobody was in a hurry to leave the room when the session was finally over.

A few days later, Dunn again was the featured scholar, this time at an Evangelical Philosophical Society session at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The
topic was the resurrection of Jesus. Dunn again presented his position on the issue and then replied to response papers by Gary Habermas and Stephen Davis. When the session was over, Gary Habermas approached me (Stewart) to ask if I would be interested in editing a book on the presentations. I was open to the idea, and we both spoke to Dunn and Davis about it that evening. We all thought it a good idea, and events were set in motion for me to edit a little book on that one section of a rather large meeting.

When I got back in touch with Jimmy via e-mail about the idea, he suggested that I invite the others who presented on Jesus Remembered to participate in the book as well. Given the fact that the focus of the Valley Forge meeting had been on oral tradition and historical memory, it seemed like a few more papers were in order. Jimmy suggested some writers, and I added a few whom I knew would make a significant contribution. And all of a sudden, we were no longer talking about a little book. As the project grew, I asked Gary to join me in editing this project. No doubt his agreeing to do so has significantly improved this book. Two are stronger than one and more likely to see clearly what is overlooked by one alone. It has been a privilege for us to work with scholars like those who have contributed to this book. We would be remiss not to thank Terry Wilder and Ray Clendenen for their belief in this project and excellent work in behalf of it. Finally, we must express our gratitude to Rhyme Putman for constructing the index. We are proud to present the fruit of their labors to you and hope that you enjoy this book as much as we do.
INTRODUCTION

ROBERT B. STEWART AND GARY R. HABERMAS

The historical Jesus is a bit like Elvis—a lot of people claim to have found him. But it seems like he always looks different. According to some, the historical Jesus was a prophet of some sort;¹ according to others, he was a sage;² still others see him as the promised Messiah;³ others think he is best understood as a Cynic,⁴ whereas others mix and match these categories. These are just a few broad sketches that have been drawn of the historical Jesus—there are many more from which to choose. This plurality of Jesuses is reflected in the questions that are asked of him. The questions are different today than in the recent past. Carey Newman notes, “The question that drove research throughout


³ A few who hold that Jesus in some way understood himself as Israel’s Messiah include M. N. A. Bockmuehl, This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); and J. P. Meier, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (vols. 1 and 2 of The Roots of the Problem and the Person; New York: Doubleday, 1991).

⁴ Two who have written of a Cynic Jesus include G. F. Downing, Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); and J. D. Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).
the middle years of the twentieth century and was fiercely argued and typically answered in either minimalist or maximalist ways is this: What can be assuredly known about the historical Jesus? Today, however, the question has been reformulated: Which Jesus should be remembered?"5

It is also unsettling that those who purportedly have discovered him seem to find him in wildly different locations. Some have found him in traditional settings, like the Synoptic Gospels. Others have found him, or at least heard his voice, in new venues like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Dead Sea Scrolls, or Secret Mark.

Ben Witherington III notes that the original quest of the historical Jesus began “not because any new or exciting data had surfaced but because the canonical Gospels were being reread in new ways.”6 This statement describes the current context in part: new reading methods are playing a role in Jesus research, but new sources—that is, new places to look for him (and possibly find him)—are also available to scholars. Like Elvis, there seems to be no end to reports of him. Unlike Elvis, many of these reports merit serious investigation.

Even the tools for the quest are different, or at least more numerous, than in times past. In addition to source, form, and redaction criticism, scholars are bringing anthropological, archaeological, sociocritical, and numerous literary critical methods to the task and mixing these methods together in imaginative and interesting ways. This has the potential effect of not only shining light on the historical figure of Jesus but also of offering historians a clearer picture of Jesus’ world. Of course, as is the case with Elvis, imagination unchecked can be a frightening thing. The potential exists not only for great enlightenment but also for great distortion. And there is the reality of numerous, conflicting reports on the historical Jesus.

Books thus seem to fly off the scholarly presses faster than stores can stock them and certainly faster than readers can purchase and read them. Jesus, it must be said, like Elvis, is big business. So, why this book about Jesus? Or even more importantly, why a book like this book—why a book about a book about Jesus?

6 Witherington, The Jesus Quest, 9.
The answer to this question is primarily twofold: because of the book itself and because of the author of the book. James D. G. Dunn is a rarity among New Testament scholars. Rare is the scholar who can master even one field sufficiently to be viewed by all parties as an expert. Rarer still is the scholar who can master two areas to that extent. Such is the case with James D. G. Dunn. Most New Testament specialists would be more than satisfied to have accomplished all that Dunn has achieved in the area of New Testament pneumatology. World-class scholars have based their careers on much less. But Dunn has gone on to write one of the most important works on Pauline theology in the latter half of the twentieth century, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, besides writing a number of other important works on Paul, to say nothing of significant commentaries or books on particular Pauline epistles, or serving as editor of the prestigious *Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*. One after another, works flow forth from his pen that could rightfully be deemed his magnum opus. But the term magnum opus is singular. Should we thus speak of Dunn’s “magnum opera”? Any mature work of James D. G. Dunn is certain to receive close scrutiny from all in his field (a sure sign of academic achievement) and thus any book that brings together significant responses to Dunn in one volume is a worthy project.

The second reason is Dunn’s book, *Jesus Remembered*, itself. *Jesus Remembered* is a monumental work that leaves almost no stone unturned. Dunn meticulously works through the issues involved in the search for Jesus and, with a surgeon’s skill and patience, provides step-by-step answers to each in turn. This sort of precision might be tedious if not for Dunn’s ability as a writer.

I (Stewart) remember well a conversation over breakfast with a leading light of the Jesus Seminar at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in which *Jesus Remembered* came up. I said that I had heard good things about the book and looked forward to reading it. He replied that reading it was “like being beaten to death by ping-pong balls.” I took that then, and still do, to mean either that it was a lightweight work or that it was very precise in its handling of issues. The book is no lightweight treatment of the subject. It does, however, proceed in a very systematic and detailed way toward its destination (which is not really its ultimate destination, given that
it is just the first in a three-volume series, *Christianity in the Making*, on the origins of Christian faith). I, on the other hand, happen to love ping-pong and believe that precision is no reason not to appreciate a book. Precision is, in fact, what keeps good scholarship headed in the right direction. *Jesus Remembered* is as precise as John P. Meier’s series and nearly as all encompassing as that of N. T. Wright. It rightfully belongs, along with John Dominic Crossan’s works on Jesus, on the upper shelf of contemporary Jesus scholarship.

But a remarkably well-written, learned, and precise book would not in and of itself be a sufficient reason to publish a book about that book. The book must also be groundbreaking. And *Jesus Remembered* is surely that. Dunn’s thesis that the only Jesus historians have access to is the remembered Jesus, coupled with his insistence that any solution to questions of gospel origins must first of all address the oral tradition rather than the literary tradition, is indeed a bold and striking one. If he is correct, then there is much that must change in contemporary gospel studies. If he is wrong, then others owe it to Dunn and the academy to show where and why.

Finally, a word must be said about the contributors to this volume. We have brought together a world-class team of scholars to probe and critique Dunn’s work. Some are Dunn’s former students, others near or distant admirers. Among our contributors are scholars working in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and Sweden. Some are quite critical of Dunn’s method and his conclusions; others are not. All respect his scholarship. Doubtless, we have left some stones unturned. There are surely important issues that are not addressed in this book. With a work as wide-ranging as *Jesus Remembered*, how could it be otherwise? (One goal for this book was to make it shorter than the 992 pages that constitute *Jesus Remembered*.) Nevertheless, important issues are addressed throughout. We are grateful for the opportunity to bring you this book and hope that you enjoy it as much as we do—and that it will drive you to read (or reread) *Jesus Remembered*. James D. G. Dunn will have the last word in this book as he responds to our authors. But certainly this will not be the last word on Dunn’s Jesus.
From Reimarus to Dunn

Situating James D. G. Dunn in the History of Jesus Research

Robert B. Stewart

A Brief History of Jesus Research

According to James D. G. Dunn, “The key issue in any attempt to talk historically about Jesus of Nazareth has been and continues to be the tension between faith and history, or more accurately now, the hermeneutical tension between faith and history” (emphasis added).¹ In this chapter, I intend to lay out broad contours of the historical methods—paying particular attention to hermeneutical issues—of certain key thinkers in the history of historical Jesus research and to situate Dunn within a broad continuum of contemporary Jesus scholars. Significant thinkers and their methods in the history of Jesus research thus need to be briefly examined to understand more fully how they impacted Jesus research. The amount of space that can be allotted to any individual in this section is limited. Some significant scholars will

¹ J. D. G. Dunn, Jesus Remembered (vol. 1 of Christianity in the Making; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 125.
be overlooked entirely, a matter that is unavoidable. It is hoped, however, that enough of a sketch will be provided that one may make out the general features of historical Jesus research over approximately the past 230 years.

The Original Quest

Albert Schweitzer dates the beginning of the quest of the historical Jesus to 1778, when G. E. Lessing’s edition of Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s essay “On the Aims of Jesus and His Disciples” was published. Prior to Reimarus, there were many harmonies of the Gospels, but there had been no scholarly attempt to study the Gospels as historical documents. All that changed with Lessing’s posthumous publication of Reimarus’s work in a series Lessing named *Fragmente eines Ugenannten* (**Fragments from an Unnamed Author**), commonly referred to today as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*.

H. S. Reimarus was born in Hamburg in 1694 and taught in Wittenberg and Wismar before spending 1720 to 1721 in Holland and England, where he became acquainted with Deism. The influence of

---

2 It is doubtless that the Enlightenment played a seminal role in motivating the study of Jesus as a purely historical figure. Chief in importance in this regard is Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza and his critique of biblical studies in “Of the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The latter work is found in B. Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* (trans. R. H. M. Elwes; New York: Dover, 1951), 1:98–119.


5 Schweitzer briefly mentions a life of Jesus that predated Reimarus that was written in Persian by the Jesuit Hieronymus Xavier, a missionary to India for a Moghul emperor. Schweitzer concludes that it was a “skilful falsification of the life of Jesus in which the omissions, and the additions taken from the Apocrypha, are inspired by the sole purpose of presenting to the open-minded ruler a glorious Jesus, in whom there should be nothing to offend him.” Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 13–14.

6 See Reimarus, “Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching.” At the time of publication, Lessing was librarian to the Duke of Brunswick at the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel, hence the name of the series.

Deism may be seen in his attempt to ground understanding of the historical Jesus in deistic Vernunft (reason). Reimarus is consumed with answering one basic question: “What sort of purpose did Jesus himself see in his teachings and deeds?” Reimarus concludes that the preaching of Jesus was separate from the writings of the apostles. He thus argues that the Gospels, not the New Testament epistles, are where one finds the historical Jesus.

However, I find great cause to separate completely what the apostles say in their own writing from that which Jesus himself actually said and taught, for the apostles were themselves teachers and consequently present their own views; indeed, they never claim that Jesus himself said and taught in his lifetime all the things that they have written. On the other hand, the four evangelists represent themselves only as historians who have reported the most important things that Jesus said as well as did. If now we wish to know what Jesus’ teaching actually was, what he said and preached, that is a res facti—a matter of something that actually occurred; hence this is to be derived from the reports of the historians. . . . Everyone will grant, then, that in my investigation of the intention of Jesus’ teaching I have sufficient reason to limit myself exclusively to the reports of the four evangelists who offer the proper and true record. I shall not bring in those things that the apostles taught or intended on their own, since the latter are not historians of their master’s teaching but present themselves as teachers. Later, when once we have discovered the actual teaching and intention of Jesus from the four documents of the historians, we shall be able to judge reliably whether the apostles expressed the same teaching and intention as their master.

Reimarus defines the essence of religion as “the doctrine of the salvation and immortality of the soul.” This generic liberal description of the essence of religion masks Reimarus’s eventual conclusions concerning Jesus. He concludes that Jesus (a) was a pious Jew; (b) called Israel to repent; (c) did not intend to teach new truth, found a new religion, or establish new rituals; (d) became sidetracked by embracing a political position; (e) sought to force God’s hand; and (f) died alone, deserted

---

8 Reimarus, “Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching,” 64.
9 Ibid., 64–65.
10 Ibid., 61.
by his disciples. What began as a call for repentance ended up as a misguided attempt to usher in the earthly, political kingdom of God.\footnote{Ibid., 61–150.}

He also posits that after Jesus’ failure and death, his disciples stole his body and declared his resurrection in order to maintain their financial security and ensure themselves some standing.\footnote{Ibid., 243–50.} Peter Gay writes that this sort of conspiracy theory is typical of Deism: “Even the sane among the deists had a paranoid view of history and politics: they saw conspiracies everywhere.”\footnote{P. Gay, Deism: An Anthology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 10.}

In typical deistic fashion, Reimarus insists that there are “no mysteries” or “new articles of faith” in the teachings of Jesus.\footnote{Reimarus, “Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching,” 71–76.} This grows out of his conviction that Jesus was essentially Jewish, not Christian. The uniquely Christian doctrines that one finds in the New Testament originate with the apostles, not Jesus. Reimarus maintains that Jesus’ mind-set was eschatological in nature. He correctly discerns that the historical Jesus is never to be found in a non-Jewish setting but wrongly sees Christianity as discontinuous with Judaism.

Reimarus explicitly rejects the twin pillars of traditional Christian apologetics concerning the deity of Jesus: miracles and prophecy.\footnote{Ibid., 229–37.} He accepts the basic historicity of the Gospels but reasons the supernatural away through the use of deistic explanations. In short, his rejection of portions of the Gospels is not the result of literary criticism but rather of a prior commitment to the deistic worldview. In this sense, his project can be said to be precritical. Reimarus is critical of supernaturalism and the miracle stories in the Gospels, but he does not read the Gospels critically as literature.

was, however, also a pioneer in hermeneutical method and life-of-Jesus research. Schleiermacher was the first scholar to lecture on life of Jesus research in a university. Although he never wrote a book on the historical Jesus, the notes from his class lectures, along with the comments of five of his students, were edited by K. A. Rütenik and published in 1864, 30 years after his death.\(^\text{17}\)

Schleiermacher divides the exegetical task into two subcategories: higher and lower criticism. His higher criticism is concerned with establishing the New Testament canon. His lower criticism is concerned with arriving at an accurate original reading of a particular text. In other words, he practiced something approaching canonical criticism and textual criticism.\(^\text{18}\)

For Schleiermacher, the Old Testament was not normative in the same way as the New Testament. It was the Scripture of Judaism, not Christianity. It could serve to help one understand the New Testament Scriptures but could not serve as the basis for Christianity, which was, in his estimation, an entirely new faith. Furthermore, the Christian interpreter was prone to read foreign ideas and concepts into the Old Testament and thus to obscure its original historic sense. Nevertheless, he concluded that it could be a useful appendix in Christian Bibles rather than part of the Christian Scriptures.\(^\text{19}\)

Hermeneutics, as opposed to exegesis, consists of two parts: the grammatical (universal) and the psychological (particular). The former focuses on the syntactical structure of a text, whereas the latter addresses the intentions of the author. In practice, however, the two are interwoven. The role of the interpreter is first to recognize distinctive markings of a particular biblical author. This is the comparative reading of a text. The second role of the reader is to intuit or divine the thought processes involved in writing the text.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^\text{19}\) Ibid. It is thus not difficult to see how Schleiermacher is hesitant to situate Jesus within Judaism.

\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., 352.
Schleiermacher primarily focuses on Jesus’ proclamation and the time period of his public ministry. He considers issues such as the virgin birth, crucifixion, and resurrection unhistorical. For Schleiermacher, what matters most in interpretation is the intention of the writer (or the historical person written about). He thus inquires of Jesus’ intentions and his perfect God-consciousness.\(^\text{21}\)

In summary, Schleiermacher understood the importance of grammatical-historical exegesis of texts and anticipated critical methods to come. Yet, in good romanticist style, he was most concerned with intuiting Jesus’ intentions and religious consciousness.

David Friedrich Strauss wrote three best-selling books about Jesus (or perhaps three different versions of one book). Each of the three was different. In retrospect, his first book has proven to be most significant. Therefore, this section will primarily focus on his first offering, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*.\(^\text{22}\)

In his first *Life of Jesus*, Strauss seeks to apply Hegel’s historical dialectic to understanding Jesus. To this end, he applies the concept of myth to the Gospels, something his teacher F. C. Baur had already done in Old Testament studies. Jesus understood mythically is the synthesis of the thesis of supernaturalism and the antithesis of rationalism. As a committed Hegelian, Strauss maintains that the inner nucleus of Christian faith is not touched by the mythical approach.

The author is aware that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts. The certainty of this alone can give calmness or dignity to our criticism, and distinguish it from the naturalistic criticism of the last century, the design of which was, with the historical fact, to subvert also the religious truth, and which thus necessarily became frivolous. A dissertation at the close of the work will show that the dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate: in the meantime let the calmness and *sang-froid* with which in the course of it, criticism undertakes apparently dangerous operations, be explained solely by

---

\(^\text{21}\) Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, 87–123.

the security of the author’s conviction that no injury is threatened to the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{23}

One can easily see then that, at least at this point, Strauss intends not to destroy the Christian faith but only to critique the Gospels historically.

Strauss emphasizes not the \textit{events} (miracles) in the Gospels (although the book is structured as an analysis of Jesus’ miracles) but the \textit{nature} of the Gospels. Unlike Reimarus, he is not primarily interested in explaining (away) how events in the Gospels took place. Neither is he interested in uncovering the sequence in which the Gospels were produced. His interest lies in revealing the nature of the Gospels as literature. By focusing on the literary nature of the Gospels, he anticipates several crucial issues in twentieth-century New Testament studies.

This represents a paradigm shift in Gospel studies. Whereas Reimarus had proposed two possibilities—natural or supernatural—Strauss proposes two different categories for interpreting the Gospels: mythic or historical. Unlike Reimarus, Strauss does not attribute the nonhistorical to deliberate deception on the part of the apostles but to their unconscious mythic imagination.\textsuperscript{24} Strauss maintains that the biblical narratives were written well after they occurred and were embellished through years of oral retelling and religious reflection.\textsuperscript{25} Strauss thus insists that the key to understanding Jesus historically is being fully aware of the differences between then and now.\textsuperscript{26} The Gospel stories, according to Strauss, are poetic in form, not historical or philosophical.\textsuperscript{27}

Although Strauss is certainly critical in questioning the supernatural events one finds in the Gospels, he is not methodologically “critical” in the sense of questioning the order or authorship of the Gospels. Ben Meyer comments that Strauss’s first \textit{Life of Jesus} is consistently less a literary discovery than a Hegelian deduction.\textsuperscript{28} Doubtless, this is one reason that he ignores the synoptic question.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] Ibid., lii.
\item[24] Ibid., 39–92.
\item[25] Ibid., 49.
\item[26] Ibid., 39–44.
\item[27] Ibid., 53.
\end{footnotes}
Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* was immediately a source of controversy. He was forbidden to teach theology any longer. Furthermore, when he took a post at another school, the controversy he created was so great that he was let go before beginning his teaching duties. In his second book on Jesus, *Das Leben Jesu: für das deutsche Volk* (The Life of Jesus: for the German People), Strauss abandons Hegelian categories for moral categories. Eventually, Strauss repudiated entirely any attachment to Christianity. David Strauss died a committed materialist.

In summary, Reimarus, Schleiermacher, and Strauss all played important roles in life of Jesus research. All of them, however, ignored what became the most consuming question for a generation of Jesus scholars to follow: in what order were the Gospels written?

Stephen Neill writes concerning the Synoptic Problem: “The first scholar to approach the correct solution of the problem on the basis of careful observation of the facts seems to have been Karl Lachmann.” In 1835, Lachmann wrote an article proposing that Mark was the earliest of the four canonical Gospels. The philosopher Christian Hermann Weisse soon echoed Lachmann’s opinion on the matter. Yet both Lachmann and Weisse were approaching the matter apart from a clearly stated and justified methodology.

It was left to Heinrich Julius Holtzmann to treat the matter in a systematic fashion. Against Strauss, he is adamant that in order to understand Jesus historically, one must first undergo a thorough investigation of the Synoptic Gospels. Holtzmann understands the primary problem in historical Jesus research to be the order of sources. Therefore, the primary task is solving the Synoptic Problem. In *Die Synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (The Synoptic

---

Gospels: Their Origin and Historical Character), Holtzmann proposes that two written sources containing sayings of Jesus, Urmarcus and Urmatthäus, were available to the evangelists.34

To the degree that Holtzmann shared the basic presuppositions of nineteenth-century German liberalism, he represents the mainstream of the first quest. Behind the fascination with sources lay the liberal presupposition that the theological elements in the Gospels were later accretions from the early church. It was assumed, therefore, that the further back one goes, the less theological and the more historical the picture of Jesus becomes. Behind this expectation lay the liberal presupposition that Jesus preached a timeless ethic.35 They fully expected to find that Jesus was a teacher of moral truths who had a unique awareness of God working through him. They also thought that by determining the order of the earliest sources, they could discern a noticeable shift in the personality of Jesus.36 It is not going too far to say that the first quest, the liberal quest, was based largely on an unwarranted optimism concerning how much historical knowledge of Jesus one could acquire from the proper application of source criticism.

Both Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack understood Jesus primarily in ethical terms. According to Ritschl, the proper object of study is the observable experience of the church because the statements in Scripture become “completely intelligible only when we see how they are reflected in the consciousness of those who believe in Him.”37 He also taught not only that the kingdom of God and the message of Jesus were ethical in nature but also that Jesus was the bearer of God’s ethical Lordship over humanity.38

The delineation of the ethical connection between the sufferings and the vocation of Christ already give place to the religious view of the same, apart from which Christ Himself was not conscious of His

---

35 Ibid., 470.
36 Ibid., 1–9.
38 Ibid., 385–484.
unique and independent vocation among men. The business of His vocation was the establishment of the universal ethical fellowship of mankind, as that aim in the world which rises above all conditions included in the notion of the world.\textsuperscript{39}

For Harnack, Jesus’ message of the kingdom emphasized (a) the kingdom of God and its coming, (b) God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul, and (c) the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.\textsuperscript{40}

Meyer comments that most Jesus scholars of that day coupled the liberal emphasis on ethics with an equally liberal “hermeneutic of empathy.”\textsuperscript{41} In turn, a host of imaginative theses were put forward in an effort to understand more fully the nature of Jesus’ religious experience by tracing out the psychological development of Jesus’ messianic awareness.\textsuperscript{42} This was very attractive in that it allowed the authors to write something akin to a \textit{biography} of Jesus.\textsuperscript{43} The weakness of this approach lay in that it was dependent more on imagination than historical method. Concerning this, Otto Pfleiderer writes,

\begin{quote}
We may never forget how much, with the poverty of the ascertained historical materials is left to the uncontrolled power of combination and divination; in other words, to the imagination, which at best can do no more than roughly and approximately arrive at the truth, while it may no less easily go far astray. . . . Yet this advance is manifestly attended by the temptation to sacrifice the caution of historical criticism to the production of a biography as rich in detail and as dramatic in movement as possible, and to represent things as the ascertained results of critical examination, which are really nothing more than subjective combinations of the writers, to which a certain degree of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 449.


\textsuperscript{41} Meyer, \textit{The Aims of Jesus}, 40.


\textsuperscript{43} The first truly significant biography of Jesus was Renan’s. E. Renan, \textit{La Vie de Jesus} (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1863).
From Reimarus to Dunn

probability will always remain, that the actual facts were something quite different.44

In 1901, William Wrede published *The Messianic Secret in the Gospels*. Wrede insisted that the psychological theories of nineteenth-century-life-of-Jesus work were derived from somewhere other than the text.

And this is the malady to which we must here allude—let us not dignify it with the euphemism “historical imagination.” *The Scientific study of the life of Jesus is suffering from psychological “suppositionitis”* which amounts to a sort of historical guesswork. For this reason interpretations to suit every taste proliferate. The number of arbitrary psychological interpretations at the same time form the basis for important structures of thought; and how often do people think that the task of criticism has already been discharged by playing tuneful psychological variations on a given factual theme!46

Wrede further maintained that the Gospels were not to be understood as biographies. The issue that he directly addressed was how best to explain the presence of the messianic theme in the Gospels. For Wrede, this messianic theme was best understood as a creation of the evangelist that reflected his attempt to harmonize two streams of thought in the early church concerning the truth that was clearly perceived in the post-Easter church. That truth was that Jesus was the Messiah but that nobody had heard him declare that prior to his death. He believed that the early church understood historically that Jesus *was made* Messiah at his resurrection, not that he *was revealed* as Messiah through the resurrection.47 The idea that Jesus was the Messiah before his resurrection was merely the result of the early church’s theological reflection on his then-evident messiahship.48

46 Ibid., 6.
48 Ibid., 219–30.
Simply put, the messianic secret was Mark’s attempt to harmonize history with theology.\textsuperscript{49} Although Wrede allowed that Jesus’ words and actions might have caused some to question if he might be the Messiah prior to his death and resurrection, he would not allow that Jesus ever taught that he was the Messiah.\textsuperscript{50} The messianic secret was the product of a theological idea, not historical facts.\textsuperscript{51}

According to Wrede, one must distinguish between historical and literary-critical questions, and literary-critical questions should be dealt with before historical ones. In this way, Wrede was able to point to messianic passages in the Gospels as support for his hypothesis, and problematic texts were thus neatly excised in the interest of historical tidiness. The result was predictable: truncated Gospels resulted in a truncated picture of Jesus. Wrede’s Jesus lacked both messianic consciousness and theological creativity. But Wrede’s conclusions have been influential in both form and redaction criticism. Consistent with the emphasis of the \textit{religionsgeschichtliche Schule}, of which Wrede is a representative, the result of Wrede’s work was to shift the focus from Jesus onto the communities the evangelists represent. Discerning the nature of the tradition behind a text thus became the focus of biblical interpretation.

On the same day in 1901 that Wrede published his book on the messianic secret, Albert Schweitzer published his \textit{The Mystery of the Kingdom of God}.\textsuperscript{52} In this brief sketch of Jesus’ life, Schweitzer pictured Jesus as thoroughly conscious of his messianic role. In fact, it

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{49}] While Wrede insists that Mark is not solely responsible for the content of his Gospel in that it reflects the theology of the early church, he does nevertheless see Mark as providing a distinctive touch. Ibid. From this, one can see how both form and redaction criticism are well in line with Wrede’s skepticism.
  \item[\textsuperscript{51}] Wrede, \textit{The Messianic Secret}, 67.
\end{itemize}
was this messianic consciousness that motivated Jesus to do all that he did. In contrast to Wrede, Schweitzer understood Jesus as a messianic hero, along the lines of Nietzsche’s cult of the hero (Übermensch). Schweitzer’s Jesus is a heroic figure, seeking to usher in the kingdom through his decisive sacrifice of himself. Schweitzer saw the messianic themes, which Wrede took to be later creations, as central to any understanding of Jesus. According to Schweitzer, one could not begin to understand Jesus without correctly perceiving that his messianic consciousness drove him to do all that he did. Tragically, although the idea of resurrection is clearly in the mind of Schweitzer’s Jesus, his summary concludes, “On the afternoon of the fourteenth of Nissan, as they ate the Paschal lamb at even, he uttered a loud cry and died.”

Schweitzer’s first offering was not overly well received. This prompted him to publish The Quest of the Historical Jesus (German: Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung) in 1906. Eventually, this work became the standard by which all other histories of life of Jesus research would be measured.

Schweitzer is often cited as one who advocated the end of historical Jesus research. Such is not the case. Schweitzer did not intend to end the quest but to redirect it. Although Schweitzer did maintain that

---


54 Schweitzer was not the first to advocate an eschatological Jesus. Johannes Weiss, Ritschl’s son-in-law, had previously written that Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God was eschatological in nature. J. Weiss, Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God (ed. and trans. R. H. Hiers and D. L. Holland; Lives of Jesus Series, ed. Leander E. Keck; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). The primary difference between Weiss and Schweitzer is that while Weiss understood eschatology as the central motif of Jesus’ teaching, Schweitzer saw it as the key to Jesus’ personality and ministry.

55 Schweitzer, The Mystery of the Kingdom, 173. Following Schweitzer’s summary of the life of Jesus, there is a one page postscript that focuses on the recognition that the nature of Jesus is bound forever to be a mystery to modern man and that modern culture can only be revived by grasping the nature of his conscious sacrifice for others. It fittingly concludes with a sentence reminiscent of Nietzsche: “Only then can the heroic in our Christianity and in our Weltanschauung be again revived.” Ibid, 174.


one could not use history to write a biography of Jesus, he believed that historical research could destroy false constructs of Jesus, including the most monstrous one of all—Jesus as a modern man. For Schweitzer, Jesus was the product of first-century Jewish apocalyptic expectation, not Enlightenment rationalism. In short, although Schweitzer believed that knowledge of the historical Jesus could not afford one a foundation upon which to ground Christian faith, he saw historical Jesus research as useful in destroying the fictional platforms that had been built by ecclesiastical dogma and Enlightenment historicism. The value of historical knowledge of Jesus was to be found in the recognition of one’s inability to know him through investigation. Instead, Jesus is known most fully in decisive individual commitment. Again, the voice of Nietzsche is heard in the conclusion of The Quest of the Historical Jesus:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.58

From the standpoint of biblical criticism and interpretive method, Schweitzer’s work is fairly simplistic. For one as concerned with critical history as he is, his approach to interpreting Scripture is surprisingly noncritical. In contrast to his predecessors, he is not especially concerned with answering source-critical questions. He accepts the general synoptic narrative as historical and interprets the Gospels in light of his one guiding principle: thoroughgoing eschatology.

The Abandoned Quest

It is often assumed that Schweitzer’s Quest ended the first phase of historical Jesus research, but such a position is simplistic. Although it

58 Ibid., 403. Those familiar with Schweitzer’s life and philosophy will immediately see that this was for Schweitzer not simply a pithy phrase but a credo for life.
is true that Schweitzer offered up a devastating critique of the liberal quest, it was left to others to provide a positive diversion from liberal historical Jesus research. Several factors contributed to bringing the first quest to an “end.”

In 1896, Martin Kähler argued that “the entire Life-of-Jesus movement is a blind alley”\(^{59}\) because the necessary sources were not available. His basic premise was that the certainty of faith could not rest on the unavoidable uncertainties of history. He declared that the accuracy of Scripture cannot be based “on the success or failure of the inquiries of historical research; for these are always limited and only provisionally valid, that is, their validity endures only until new sources of knowledge appear on the horizon.”\(^{60}\) Instead of searching for the *historical* Jesus, one should seek the *historic* Jesus, the one who has molded history and contributed to it.\(^{61}\)

Also in addition to Schweitzer’s critique of the liberal historical Jesus project, there was the influence of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, the history of religions school. Two names often associated with the history of religions school are Ernst Troeltsch and Wilhelm Bousset.

Troeltsch served as the philosopher for the movement. He insisted that Christianity was not historically unique. Like all religions, it was a historical phenomenon within its own time. Consequently, Jesus was no different than any other figure in history. To insist, like Kähler, that faith in Jesus is not subject to historical critique is simply naive, according to Troeltsch.\(^{62}\) The historian is bound to explain movements in terms of causal events in the natural world.\(^{63}\) Therefore, the historian’s role in relation to Christian origins is simply to explain how Christianity came to be, not to answer theological or metaphysical


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 63.


questions concerning Jesus. The hermeneutical result of applying this principle to the study of Christian origins was that the referent of the Gospels became the early church, not Jesus. Therefore, the question changed from “Who was Jesus?” to “How did the early church come to think of Jesus in this way?”

Bousset’s answer in *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* was that the church came to deify Jesus through a historical process of transformation due to its encounter with Hellenism, an encounter in which alien ideas were grafted into Christianity. He maintained that the earliest traditions concerning Jesus contained nothing miraculous and did not proclaim Jesus to be divine.\(^6^4\)

The shadow of Rudolf Bultmann falls over any attempt to understand New Testament theology in the twentieth century. Along with K. L. Schmidt and Martin Dibelius, he pioneered New Testament form criticism.\(^6^5\) He understood the Gospels as collections of fragments edited together that addressed particular needs of the early church, not as single documents chronicling the life of Jesus. Therefore, Bultmann understood the primary purpose of form criticism to be the discovery of the origin of the particular units of oral tradition that lay behind the written pericopae of the Gospels, not simply identifying different forms of Gospel sayings.\(^6^6\) In *Jesus and the Word*, he declares, “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.”\(^6^7\) Bultmann posits that the early church was filled with controversy and infighting between Hellenistic Jewish believers and Palestinian Jewish believers. This results in a situation where sayings are attributed to Jesus that he


From Reimarus to Dunn

did not utter. This led him to declare, “One can only emphasize the uncertainty of our knowledge of the person and work of the historical Jesus and likewise of the origin of Christianity.”68 The result was not only that form criticism, like the history of religions school, focused on something other than Jesus, the Sitz im Leben of the early church, but also that its foremost proponent announced that historical Jesus research could not succeed.

Bultmann’s objections to historical Jesus research were not only methodological but also philosophical and theological. Influenced as he was by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, as well as the early Karl Barth,69 Bultmann thought that historical knowledge of Jesus’ persönlichkeit (personhood) was secondary in importance to existential knowledge of his word.70 Bultmann’s approach is first to recognize that the New Testament is mythological in nature and second to demythologize the New Testament myths. Bultmann openly draws on Heidegger’s categories of existence and being to interpret the New Testament. But what often is missed in his method is that he adopts these categories because he believes that the New Testament demands to be demythologized—that such was the intention of the authors.71

Bultmann thus contributed to a decline in historical Jesus research in several ways: (a) his form critical method shifted the emphasis from Jesus onto the early Christian communities, (b) his form critical conclusions led to a sense of pessimism concerning historical Jesus research in general, (c) his demythologization shifted the emphasis from history to anthropology, and (d) his commitment to existentialism assigned historical knowledge of Jesus to a secondary status and thus undermined the entire project in general.

In summary, several factors were influential in the abandonment of the original quest of the historical Jesus. Among them were (a) Wrede’s

---


69 Other influences on Bultmann include Luther, Collingwood, and the history of religions school as well as the liberal theology of his teacher, Harnack. For a general discussion of influences on Bultmann, see Thielston, The Two Horizons, 205–51.

70 Bultmann, Jesus and the Word, 9–12.

skepticism, (b) Schweitzer’s critique of nineteenth-century lives of Jesus, (c) the influence of Martin Kähler, (d) the influence of the history of religions school, (e) the rise of form criticism, (f) Bultmann’s demythologizing hermeneutic, and (g) the influence of existentialism on dialectical theology.

The New Quest of the Historical Jesus

The movement in historical Jesus research that is commonly called the “New Quest of the Historical Jesus” began in 1953 with a speech by Ernst Käsemann to a group of Bultmann’s former students. Käsemann agreed with Bultmann about the earlier quest: it was largely impossible and at least partially irrelevant. Käsemann also insisted that the primary interest of the primitive church was not historical verification of facts concerning Jesus but rather the proclamation of the kerygma. He held that the primitive church sought to rescue historical facts from obscurity through appeal to the reality of their present experience of Jesus as Lord. Käsemann concludes that this was not only the experience of the primitive church but also the task of Christians today. But he also insists that to disregard Jesus entirely as a historical figure is to lapse into docetism. Käsemann thus argues for a new type of historical inquiry concerning Jesus: one that recognizes that mere history apart from hermeneutics is insignificant.

For mere history becomes significant history not through tradition as such but through interpretation, not through the simple establishment of facts but through the understanding of the events of the past which have become objectified and frozen into facts. . . . Mere history only takes on genuine historical significance in so far as it can address both a question and an answer to our contemporary situation; in other words, by finding interpreters who hear and utter this question and answer. For this purpose primitive Christianity allows mere history no vehicle of expression other than the kerygma.

---

73 Ibid., 20.
74 Ibid., 46.
75 Ibid., 21.
Historical inquiry is thus more difficult than either the supernaturalists or the rationalists imagined it to be. Käsemann’s solution is to focus on the language of Jesus by separating the authentic from the inauthentic in the preaching of Jesus by applying the criterion of dissimilarity to his preaching.\(^{76}\)

Although Käsemann was the initiator of the New Quest, James M. Robinson was the popularizer and historian of the movement. His 1959 book, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus,\(^{77}\) gave the label “New Quest” intelligibility in the vocabulary of contemporary historical Jesus research. Robinson was primarily concerned to answer the question of how Jesus the proclaimer became Jesus Christ the proclaimed.\(^{78}\) Also recognized with Käsemann and Robinson as participants in the New Quest were Günther Bornkamm, Norman Perrin, Hans Conzelmann, Ernst Fuchs, and Gerhard Ebeling.

Redaction criticism was primarily developed by Bornkamm and Conzelmann.\(^{79}\) Although redaction criticism presupposes the results of source and form criticism, it also differs in several respects. It focuses on whole Gospels as well as the individual pericope. It stresses the role of the evangelist before that of the community or tradition. In doing so, it seeks to answer the question “What is the theology of this gospel?”\(^{80}\) The hermeneutical effect of redaction criticism has been to focus on how the Gospel stories relate to each other, which has led to reading the Gospels as whole stories, not just as disparate fragments. This has led to a renewal of interest among biblical scholars in theology. But as seen before with form criticism and the history of religions school, the focus is still not on Jesus but on the theology of the editors of the Gospels.

The effect of the New Quest of the historical Jesus was to focus on the language of Jesus and the theological intentions of those who

---

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 37.


\(^{78}\) Ibid., 22–25.


edited his message for later readers. Through it all, the New Quest still maintained Bultmann’s existential concerns and was relatively short-lived because it was perceived to be much the same in nature as the Bultmannian “No Quest.”

The Present State of the Quest: Situating Dunn

Less than a century ago, the historical quest for Jesus was widely believed by many to be if not dead then at least at a dead end. Even when I began seminary in the mid-1980s, the quest was still thought of largely in terms of the “New Quest,” and that quest viewed as a relatively small group of scholars working with post-Bultmannian presuppositions that had run low on steam. Such is clearly not the case today. There has never been more activity and variety in the field of historical Jesus research than there has been in the last 25 years. I do not think it is going too far to say that the last 25 years have been the most fruitful in all the years of scholarly investigation of the historical figure of Jesus. In other words, more significant work from a wider array of perspectives has been produced in the last two and a half decades than at any time since Reimarus’s fragments were first published. We are truly living in the golden age of research on the historical Jesus. Mostly this is because of the variety of historical and interpretive methods that are used today in New Testament scholarship.

In the last part of his *Quest*, Schweitzer concluded that there were only two live options for those wishing to find the historical Jesus: Wrede’s thoroughgoing skepticism or his own thoroughgoing eschatology.81 Wrede’s approach led to historical skepticism and non-Jewish, modernist conclusions concerning Jesus, based mostly on his willingness to treat messianic texts as inventions of the evangelists. Schweitzer’s approach, on the other hand, led to wholly eschatological, Jewish conclusions concerning Jesus, mostly due to his refusal to assign messianic statements to the early church.

N. T. Wright holds that Schweitzer’s words, written at the beginning of the century, have proven prophetic in that most who are

81 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 398.
seeking the historical Jesus may be grouped into two camps: those who have followed Wrede (thoroughgoing skepticism) and those who have followed Schweitzer (thoroughgoing eschatology). In recognizing these two distinct groups, Wright distinguishes between the Third Quest and the Renewed New Quest. The Renewed New Quest has adopted the thoroughgoing skepticism of Wrede concerning the Gospels as sources and has sought to discover a non-Jewish Jesus. The Third Quest has sought to ground Jesus within the Judaism of the first century and has been far less skeptical than the Renewed New Quest concerning the value of the canonical Gospels as sources for the life of Jesus. The most obvious expression of the Renewed New Quest is the Jesus Seminar, led by the late Robert Funk. Some prominent advocates of the Third Quest include Wright, E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, Ben Witherington III, the late Ben F. Meyer, and James D. G. Dunn. This does not mean, of course, that all contemporary parties in historical Jesus research fit neatly into one of these two categories. But recognition that these two overarching categories are not perfect does not render them useless.

While recognizing the validity of Wright’s observations concerning Wrede and Schweitzer, skepticism and eschatology are not mutually exclusive categories. One can be skeptical about the chances of significant success in discovering a historical basis for knowledge of Jesus and still hold that Jesus had an eschatological orientation (e.g., as Bultmann did). Still, in recognizing the diversity of approaches in present-day Jesus scholarship, one must provide some way to measure or classify various approaches that different authors take in seeking him. To this end, I suggest that we think in terms of “modern” approaches on the one hand and “postmodern” on the other, recognizing that these two overarching categories are somewhat ill defined and that the terms are more broadly descriptive than specifically definitive.

Historians adopting an essentially modernist approach seek to be as scientific and as objective as possible in the doing of history. They are thus optimistic about the possibility of discovering what history

---

can tell us of Jesus, although they may be somewhat pessimistic about how close history can take us to the actual person of Jesus of Nazareth. A modern approach insists that some pictures of Jesus are right and others are wrong or, at the very least, that some pictures of Jesus more accurately describe the historical figure of Jesus than do others. The modern approach also insists that there is a right way to conduct historical research and of reading texts about Jesus, although different scholars disagree about historical method and how texts should be read or what they mean.

Postmodern historians are pessimistic about the possibility of ever engaging in historical research with a sufficiently objective mindset. Furthermore, they doubt that any historian can arrive at a single picture of Jesus that is correct or better than any other picture. Texts about Jesus are thus essentially open. The postmodern position says that Jesus is now, and forever has been, a construct—and that this is not a bad thing for historians because we live in a world that is composed of stories and symbols. Whereas modernist historians see history as being essentially a scientific task, postmodern historians view it either as a literary task or perhaps a quest for self-realization, better suited to the school of humanities than the science department.

The projects of John P. Meier and E. P. Sanders serve as good examples of an essentially modern approach to the quest. Meier optimistically declares that he hopes to find the Jesus that a symposium composed of a Roman Catholic scholar, a Protestant scholar, a Jewish scholar, and an agnostic scholar could agree on. On the other hand, he pessimistically declares, “By the Jesus of History I mean the Jesus whom we can ‘recover’ and examine by using the scientific tools of modern historical research,” and “both method and goal are extremely narrow and limited: the results do not claim to provide either a substitute for or the object of faith.”

E. P. Sanders also brings an essentially modernist approach to the task. Sounding like a scientist, he spends a great deal of time talking

---

84 Ibid., 25.
85 Ibid., 30–31.
about evidence, facts, and hypotheses. He also seeks to be as objective and impartial as possible. In doing so, he intends not to raise questions or provide answers of theological significance but to be purely historical. Finally, he intends to focus on “facts” about Jesus rather than “sayings” of Jesus.

The postmodern end of the continuum is ably represented by John Dominic Crossan. Crossan has no illusions about being objective. He forthrightly declares, “I am concerned, not with an unattainable objectivity, but with an attainable honesty. My challenge to my colleagues is to accept those formal moves or, if they reject them, to replace them with better ones. They are, of course, only formal moves, which then demand a material investment.” He further sees a plurality of equally valid positions concerning the historical Jesus (although his own reconstruction presents Jesus as a peasant, Jewish cynic). Recognizing that there will be differing valid responses to, and readings of, Jesus does not in any way lead him to be pessimistic about either history or faith or to conclude that the historical Jesus is not relevant to Christian faith.

But there is not in my work any presumption that the historical Jesus or earliest Christianity is something you get once and for all forever. And that is not because Jesus and Christianity are special or unique. No past of continuing importance can ever avoid repeated reconstruction.

In every generation, the historical Jesus must be reconstructed anew, and that reconstruction must become by faith the face of God for here and now.

Many have commented, however, on the apparent contradiction between Crossan’s seemingly objective evaluation of sources and his

---

87 Ibid., 2.
88 Ibid., 3–13.
91 J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contour of the Canon* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1995), 7–11.
postmodern preference for perspectivalism.\textsuperscript{92} Simply put, in my estimation, Crossan’s supposedly objective manner of treating sources is subjectively colored by his esoteric selection of which sources belong to which historical strata. Yet Crossan is happy to allow others to reach their own conclusions regarding who they believe the historical Jesus was so long as they seek him, are confronted by him, and respond appropriately to the Jesus they find. In the 2005 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum dialogue between Crossan and Wright on the resurrection of Jesus, Crossan repeatedly declared that the \textit{mode} of Jesus’ resurrection was secondary in importance to the \textit{meaning} of his resurrection.\textsuperscript{93}

The work of Wright falls in between these two extremes. On the one hand, giving a nod to the postmodern approach, he forthrightly declares that the historian plays a role in the creation of the history to which contemporary readers have access when he distinguishes between history as events that actually happened (history-E) and history as what people write about what actually happened (history-W).\textsuperscript{94}

Part of the point of all historical study is to recognize that all “history-W” is written from one particular angle, involving particular selection and arrangement. Nobody ever “tells it like it was,” because all events from the fall of a leaf to the fall of an empire, are too complex for that. All “history-W” therefore involves fresh selection, fresh rearrangements, not in order to prove that previous “history-W” “got it wrong” as regards “history-E” but in order that people of


our own generation may glimpse afresh the “history-E” that previous “history-W” was trying to unveil.  

Wright also maintains that all history is storied in nature, again sounding postmodern in terms of favoring narrative over propositions. History is, Wright insists, “neither ‘bare facts’ nor ‘subjective interpretations,’ but is rather the meaningful narrative of events and intentions.” Accordingly, Wright appeals to a type of narrative analysis similar to that of A. J. Greimas.

On the other hand, Wright rejects the postmodern skepticism that says that all that individuals can know are stories, which order their (constructed) world but do not actually depict past (or present) reality. Furthermore, Wright is clearly a historical realist, albeit a critical realist. As such, he acknowledges “the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’).” Accordingly, he rejects a strong version of postmodernism: “To those for whom the study and writing of history is their everyday concern, the qualms of postmodernism will seem incredibly, almost impossibly, over-cautious, shy and retiring. We simply can write history. We can know things about what has happened in the past.”

---

95 Wright, “In Grateful Dialogue,” 246–47.
96 Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, 82. Wright’s concern for intentionality parallels speech-act theory in some ways. Both argue that intentionality is a vital component in determining meaning. In other words, it is through “doing things,” whether with words (speech-act theory), physical actions (action theory), or both (Wright’s worldview analysis), that one’s intentions become clear to interpreters and historians. On speech-act theory, see J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962); J. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
97 Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, 69–70. Recognizing that Greimas’s method is decidedly antihistorical, Wright’s intention is not so much to follow it slavishly but to reuse a particular aspect of it. For more on Greimas’s method, see A. J. Greimas, Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method (trans. D. McDowell, R. Schleifer, and A. Veile; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).
99 Ibid., 81.
So, where does James D. G. Dunn’s work fit in relation to those who surround him today? Dunn’s work is sophisticated and therefore not simple to pin down. Like his Durham neighbor Wright, Dunn holds to a highly nuanced view that recognizes some validity from both sides of the continuum while not tilting strongly to one side or the other. He grants that there are no “bare facts” that exist as “objective artifacts”\(^{100}\) and there are no raw data that have not been selected by the historical process or arrive on the scene without a historical context.\(^{101}\) On the other hand, he cautions against a strong view of “textual autonomy.”\(^{102}\) The text alone is never enough for historical research because there is always a hermeneutical circle (or spiral) at work or, to use Gadamer’s terminology, dual horizons of interpretation. Historical texts depend on more than themselves as they draw on (a) wider linguistic usage of the time (as well as appealing to other texts outside themselves), (b) language as well as words, and (c) the horizon of the reader as well the horizon of the text. Accordingly, understanding is always provisional and subject to clarification as the whole is illuminated by the parts and vice versa.\(^{103}\)

Pessimistically he notes that there is always a hermeneutical distance or gap but optimistically he appeals to Gadamer’s concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effect) and notes that “the gap between text and reader is not empty; it is filled by the effect which the text has exercised in the in-between time between ‘an historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition,’” which actually conditions a reader to understand the text by producing an “historically effected consciousness.”\(^{104}\)

Sounding fairly modern, he maintains that there are three “norms” for interpreters of the Jesus tradition: (1) the Greek text for translation, (2) the “plain meaning” for interpretation, and (3) the synoptic tradition

\(^{100}\) Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 108–9.

\(^{101}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 118–22.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 122. This section brings to mind thoughts of speech-act theory but apart from a single note saying that Anthony Thiselton referred him to John R. Searle (referred to as R. Searle in both the note and the index) and Nicholas Wolterstorff, there is nothing at all on speech-act theory or the apparent similarity between Gadamer on this point and speech-act theorists. Ibid., 117n63.
for any attempt to illuminate the origins of Christianity. But this should not be taken to mean that he believes that certainty is achievable in historical research if only one observes these norms. Insisting that certainty is not attainable for the historian, he prefers to speak of probability but notes that in history, probability is a “very positive verdict.”

Memory and oral tradition are the two concepts that immediately leap off the page when reading Jesus Remembered. At the heart of Dunn’s declaration in this regard is not simply that what we have in the Jesus tradition is the product of memory or that we cannot get back to Jesus himself or what he did or said, having access only to what his disciples remembered about him. I think Dunn would affirm all of the above but not merely all of the above. What we have in the earliest Jesus tradition is a reaction to Jesus by his earliest disciples—indeed a pre-Easter reaction to what he did and said. Historically speaking, I find this to be an extremely optimistic and balanced position. He is not declaring a la postmodernism that all one can ever know of Jesus is some sort of construct or that any take on Jesus is as good as any other. But neither is he saying that one can find a Jesus who is purely the product of reasoned—that is, scientific—historical investigation. As a theologian, I find this to be a tremendously positive way of saying that faith and history are not at odds but are in fact comrades. Dunn forthrightly declares, “In short, the tension between faith and history has too often been seen as destructive of good history. On the contrary, however, it is the recognition that Jesus can be perceived only through the impact he made on his first disciples (that is, their faith) which is the key to a historical recognition (and reassessment) of that impact.”

It “sounds” like Dunn is not taking us back as far as we would like, but in reality he is saying that the synoptic tradition arises from an encounter with Jesus. He boldly asserts that this is as good as it gets for historical figures who wrote nothing: “In one sense, of course, we are simply recognizing the nature of the evidence which any biographer has to weigh who has no access to any writings of the biography’s subject.” One thing that is abundantly clear—and often overlooked by

---

105 Ibid., 103.
106 Ibid., 132.
107 Ibid., 131.
those responding to Dunn—is that he firmly believes that the synoptic tradition takes us back before Jesus’s crucifixion, which is something many would be hesitant to affirm. He confidently concludes, “However great the shock of Good Friday and Easter for the first disciples, it would be unjustified to assume that these events marked a discontinuity with their initial disciple-response, that they brought about complete disruption of their earlier disciple faith and that the traditioning process began only from that point on.”108 This leads to Dunn’s third norm: the priority of the synoptic tradition for getting at the origins of Christianity.109 Granting that there were differing faith responses to Jesus from the start, Dunn nevertheless insists that there was a unified (not uniform) core of belief that embraced and held together “a diversity of faith responses from the first” and that this is the explanation for the homogeneity one finds in the synoptic traditions.110

In emphasizing the role of faith in the development of the synoptic tradition, Dunn recognizes the danger of retreating into a postmodern enclave of a purely communal reading of texts about Jesus. This leads him to insist that history be a public discipline and to desire, like the vast majority of those historians who have sought for Jesus before him, that the Jesus of history have a voice to address contemporary culture.111

So, where to situate Dunn? He is neither purely modern nor postmodern in his method or hermeneutic. He not only recognizes some of postmodernism’s critiques of modernism as valid, but he also rejects many common postmodern positions such as the autonomy of the text, perspectivalism, or communalism. He falls in the middle ground with Wright, with both affirming critical realism. He is more skeptical than Wright as to the usefulness of narrative criticism112 and rejects Wright’s big idea of the “return from exile.”113 They both reach fairly traditional conclusions concerning Jesus and do so with a fair amount of epistemological humility. They both also offer bold ways

---

108 Ibid., 133.
109 Ibid., 135.
110 Ibid., 134.
111 Ibid., 136.
112 Ibid., 119.
113 Ibid., 331–32.
forward that have been met with a good bit of commentary and criticism. At the end of the day, I see Dunn as depending a bit less on postmodern methods than Wright does but a bit more postmodern in his expectation—that is, a bit more pessimistic about getting Jesus right than Wright is.

Concerning his method and hermeneutic, I think Dunn’s approach could be more fully supported by some discussion and appeal to speech-act theory. The distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts would enable him to be more clear in expressing his program. (I think he is already broadly thinking in such ways.) I would also like to see more explicit discussion of worldviews, particularly the worldview of second-temple Judaism and the role that understanding it plays in interpreting texts about Jesus. I think he does go partway down this path with his insistence that texts, like children, have rights, such as knowing their parentage and place of origin. I think his project could be more fully supported by explicitly addressing the role that worldviews play in communication and interpretation. Finally, I have some suspicions as to how specialists in philosophical hermeneutics would read his reading or use of Hans-Georg Gadamer. I am in agreement with what Dunn says when he appeals to Gadamer. I just wonder if Gadamer or those specializing in his thought would also agree.

At each and every point along the way, the quest of the historical Jesus has been impacted not only by various philosophical presuppositions but also by different critical and hermeneutical methods. The conclusions and methods of Reimarus, Strauss, and Schleiermacher were impacted by their philosophical presuppositions. The historical Jesus of the first quest (after Schleiermacher) was the product of liberal theology coupled with source criticism. The (non)historical Jesus of the No Quest period was the product of the history of religions school, Bultmann’s existentialism, and form criticism. The Jesus of the New Quest was the result of the post-Bultmannian emphasis on the language of Jesus coupled with redaction criticism’s concern to discover the theological motivation of the evangelists. Similarly, contemporary quests of Jesus, whether of the Renewed New Quest or Third Quest variety, modern or postmodern variety, are at least in part the product

114 Ibid., 114.
of the philosophical mood of our day and contemporary interpretive methods brought to bear on historical data concerning Jesus. It has always been and always will be thus. I am grateful for Dunn’s important and impressive contribution to the field. I look forward to the completion of his massive project with great interest.