PARALLEL GUIDE 15
The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Summary

This chapter begins a four-part unit on Jesus. The quest for the historical Jesus asks the question: "Do we actually know anything of Jesus and who he was?" After reading the Gospels, what can we say? What are the real words of Jesus? What did he really do?

Learning Objectives

• Become familiar with the works of some of the important authors who have studied the question: "Who was Jesus?"

Albert Schweitzer
Rudolf Bultmann
Martin Kähler
Johannes Weiss
C. H. Dodd
Vincent Taylor

• Define the following:

Diatessaron
Historie
criterion of consistency
demythologizing
Geschichte
criterion of dissimilarity

• Become familiar with the problems of interpreting texts and deriving history and meaning from them

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Consider your experience of the differences or similarities between "truth" and "history." Have you read newspaper accounts that were factual but did not tell the story as you understood it? How does this experience inform your reading of biblical texts? How much of the meaning of a text is already in the mind of the reader?

2. How would you hear the story of Jesus differently if you were from another culture and faith? What questions would you have?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The quest for Jesus, the story of his life and the meaning of his message, is an enduring controversy. Be prepared to state your own position and hear those of others in your seminar group. There are very diverse opinions about the "historical Jesus" that faithful Christians express. How do you reconcile them?

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Chapter 15
THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The Problem of the Historical Jesus

We have looked at four traditions about the life and work of Jesus. We have considered their different emphases and claims. We now turn to a question we must face directly. We have some understanding of what the Gospels claim about Jesus, but how can we know that any of it is true? Do we, in fact, actually know anything of Jesus as he really was? What can we say about "the historical Jesus"?

As is obvious—particularly in view of what was said earlier about the problem of knowledge and the postmodernist challenge to positivist assumptions—the phrase "historical Jesus" is hardly without problems of its own. It is "Jesus" whom we can, at least in principle, recover and examine using the tools of modern historical research (cf. John P. Meier 1991, 21-40). Depending on where we are and whom we ask, we no doubt get wildly differing answers to such questions. Some may simply assure us that since the Bible is inspired by God, what it says is true. Therefore what it says about Jesus must describe him "as he really was." Others may say that, since the Bible is mostly "myths and legends written hundreds of years after the event," it is unlikely to contain any factually accurate information at all. During the twentieth century there have been learned biblical scholars who claim that all we could learn from the Gospels are the ideas and interests of the early churches that wrote them. Only with great caution, they argue, might we dare to suggest that anything said about Jesus in the Gospels is actually what he taught or did. Between these extreme views there can be, of course, a whole range of other answers.

The problem of identifying what is factual in the Gospels is not limited to the questions of credibility and point of view that might be raised by the sophisticated skeptic or by a postmodernist. The problem also emerges at a quite simple level. The fact is, we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John four accounts of the life of Jesus, and they do not all say the same thing. Indeed, sometimes they seem to contradict one other. For example, Matthew says that the temptations of Jesus happened in one order, Luke in another (see Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Again, according to Mark, the Last Supper was a Passover meal (see Mark 14:12-26).

According to John, however, at Jesus' trial before Pilate, the priests "did not enter the headquarters [of Pilate], so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover" (John 18:28), in which case the Last Supper seems to have taken place on the night before Passover. Which is right? Is there something here that we do not know, that might make sense of both accounts? Is either account historical, in the usual sense of that word?

Does it matter?

We should first address a preliminary question. Does the question of "the historical Jesus" really matter? Is it not the teachings and the message that are important? If so, would it be a matter of concern if the story of their origins were a fiction? In fact the problem of the "historical Jesus" does matter, for at least two reasons.

First, Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey pointed out long ago in a classic study that, whenever Christians confess the words of the Nicene Creed, "*and was incarnate*," they mark that "the Christian religion has its origin neither in general religious experience, nor in some peculiar esoteric mysticism, nor in a dogma." Christian faith rests "upon a particular event in history . . . . This is Christian orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant. In consequence, the Christian religion is not merely open to historical investigation, but demands it . . ." (Hoskyns and Davey 1931, 11-12). Is this to say that the Christ of our faith is *limited* to what can be demonstrated by historical-critical investigation? No, it is not. If a young man comes into your study and says that he has just met the most wonderful woman in the world, and that she is called Sophie, he clearly presents a claim that would be hard to demonstrate or falsify—and for him, at least, it may be a very important claim, one that will give joy and significance to his life and hers, and lead to future generations who are to be lights of the world. All this is possible, but not demonstrable. On the other hand, if you discover on investigation that there seems to be no evidence that there is a woman in his life called Sophie, you may well question the young man's sanity, or his truthfulness. To that extent his claim is open to critical investigation. Critical realism demands that we confess the subjective element in our observations. It also requires that we subject our observations to investigation where that is possible and appropriate.

When we confess with the disciples that "God raised Jesus from the dead," we make primarily a theological statement, and as such it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. God is not a proper subject for critical investigation. For many people the risen Christ is a part of their personal experience in prayer and in life. That also is a matter that cannot be critically investigated. If critical investigation could demonstrate that there never was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, or that the first Christians had simply stolen the body and faked the Resurrection (as some at least as early as the time of the Gospel According to Matthew were suggesting [Matt. 28:11-15]), we should be obliged to question either their sanity or their honesty—or our own. (We can say this with confidence, since it appears that, if one thing is certain, it is that the first Christians really believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. We may make of their conviction what we will, but the fact of it, in our view, can scarcely be denied by anyone with any historical sense.) To that extent the origins of the Christian faith are not merely open to critical investigation but, as Hoskyns and Davey said, they demand it.

Second, the question of "the historical Jesus" matters because *observable data, while they cannot lead to theological conclusions, can raise theological questions*. This is a point made several times recently, not by theologians or biblical scholars, but by scientists and philosophers. John Leslie, pointing to the extraordinarily complex and (in terms of chance collocation) unlikely combination of circumstances needed to produce life in a universe, notes that scientific observation faces us with a choice of two explanations of life in ours: *either* there is an infinite series of universes, each with its own laws and circumstances, in which case it is perfectly possible that one of them might come within that narrow band in which it is possible for life to evolve—and that, of course, is the one we are in, otherwise we would not exist; or

there is only one universe, in which case there is evidently a design and therefore a designer. From the strictly scientific point of view either explanation is possible, but it is scientific observation itself that raises —although it cannot answer—the question, which is actually correct? Therefore scientific observation itself raises the theological question (Leslie 1989).

The historical critical study of the New Testament itself faces us with certain data— most notably the data concerning Jesus' Resurrection and the rise of the Christian church—that *compel* us, if we take them seriously, to ask theological questions. Does this tie our faith to the conclusions of historical-critical scholarship? Does it advocate a "papacy of scholars," as it is sometimes called? God forbid! The *answer* to these questions will not come through scientific observation. If the testimony of the saints is to be trusted, such answers become available only through things that are not dreamed of in scientific observation, such as prayer, obedience, and hearing and proclaiming the Word. It remains true, as it was for St. Paul, that it is "through the foolishness of our proclamation" that "God decided . . . to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). But the theological questions may be raised by other means—and probably are. That is why Christians should not fear—why, indeed, they should invite—critical investigation of their origins (cf. Wright 1996, 83-144).

The Church and the Problem of History: The First Sixteen Centuries

From the earliest days of the church, theologians realized the problem of having four different Gospels. St. Augustine in a writing called *De consensu evangelistarum* ("A Harmony of the Gospels") gave rules for interpreting the differences between them. He pointed out that they sometimes give the overall sense of Jesus' words rather than an exact report, and that the order of events occasionally represents general recollection rather than strict historical order (2.12).

It is a tribute to the church's honesty that it preserved four Gospels, contradictions and all, and did not simply remove the problems by harmonizing them into one. There were moves in that direction. In the second half of the second Christian century a man called Tatian produced what became known as the "Diatessaron" (Greek for "by means of four"). This was an editing of the four Gospels into a single narrative with many of the difficulties and contradictions ironed out. For a time the Diatessaron was very popular in Syria and looked as if it might replace the four. In the end, however, the church decided to stick with the Four Gospels, and Tatian's work fell into disuse.[top]

Christians did not make much of these problems, either in the early church, or in the Middle Ages, or at the time of the Reformation. It was generally assumed that since the Scriptures were divinely inspired in every part, it was impossible that there should be any significant contradiction in them. If there seemed to be a contradiction, that must be because the reader had not understood properly. In other words, the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman attitudes to interpretation of sacred texts survived largely intact. We might think that such attitudes were simply ways of avoiding difficult questions, but that was not at all how the ancients saw the matter. "The doubt felt by some in respect of the articles of the faith," Thomas Aquinas said, "is not the result of any uncertainty in the thing itself. It is a result of the weakness of human

understanding. Nevertheless, the least knowledge which one can have of higher things is worth more than the most certain knowledge of lesser things" (*Summa contra gentiles* I, Qi, Art. 6).

Human beings really are not able to have exact knowledge in matters like religion. By saying this, Aquinas did not think he was original. He thought he was saying what everyone knew. It was not, as some have

imagined, that people in the late Roman Empire or the Middle Ages did not know the difference between scientific and other kinds of knowledge such as the knowledge that comes through poetry, imagination, or intuition, although they did not possess our understanding of experimental method. What was important was simply that *they did not regard scientific knowledge as the most important kind of knowledge*. Which of us, they might have asked, decides anything that matters—such as whom to marry, whether to lie or tell the truth, or what faith to believe—on the basis of exact, scientific knowledge? What kind of scientific knowledge could possibly give the final answer to such questions? According to Aquinas, it is impossible to have exact knowledge about anything that matters.

The Enlightenment and Critical Study of the Bible

In the eighteenth century, during the era of Western European history that is sometimes called the Enlightenment, scholars throughout Europe and in North America did begin to take a new interest in the "scientific" and "exact" handling of evidence, including historical. Why this happened at that particular time is hard to explain. Perhaps the knowledge gained by such study gave power in rather obvious ways. Armies equipped with scientifically designed weapons were able to defeat armies that were not. The spirit of scientific inquiry, once aroused, turned its attention to the Bible, and—despite horrified protests from some in the churches—began to ask every kind of hard question about its origins, accuracy, and authority. Some of those who asked (and continue to ask) these questions were (and are) skeptics determined to undermine religion. But there have always been other believers, who were convinced that real faith had nothing to fear from honest questions and that a religion afraid of such questions was not worth having. Here scientific study of the gospel narratives really began. The story of the "quest" (as it came to be known) for "the historical Jesus" throughout the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries is a fascinating one.

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Albert Schweitzer's (1875-1965) *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, first published in an English translation in 1910, is the classic account. He showed, often with biting wit, how each writer's opinion of Jesus' message had been determined by the writer's own philosophical preferences and by contemporary understandings of reality. In other words, long before the advent of postmodernism, he pointed to the essentially *subjective* nature of their allegedly *objective* studies. His account is still well worth reading.

It is important for us to note two things about the nineteenth-century quest.

First, these scholars had the courage to ask questions. An enormous amount of work was done to describe the relationship of our present Gospels to each other, the kind of sources they may have used ("source criticism"), and what is the best and earli-

est text of the NT ("textual criticism"). Much of this work (such as establishing that Mark's was the earliest Gospel) continues to stand, and any modern introduction to NT criticism, such as that attempted in the earlier chapters of this study, is bound to build on much that these scholars achieved. We owe them a great deal.

Second, there arose in time a measure of agreement, among most liberal Protestant scholars, about how the "historical Jesus" could be found. ("Liberal" is a confusing word, used in many different senses. By "liberal Protestant" we mean scholars who incline strongly to a non-dogmatic reconstruction of the Christian faith, usually concentrating on its ethical and humanitarian aspects.) The most obvious features of this agreement were as follows:

1) The earliest of our written Gospels was Mark, which was used independently by Matthew and Luke.

2) Since Mark's is the earliest Gospel, it gave us a broadly reliable historical outline, and this might be supplemented, with caution, by some teaching material from the other Gospels.

3) These sources had to be used carefully. This meant discounting or calling into question the more violently apocalyptic teaching, such as Mark 13, and the miraculous parts of the story, which in the view of most liberal Protestants were legendary.

Such were the general ideas underlying a number of "lives of Jesus" produced during this period. Some of these "lives" were trivial. Some were works of great learning and depth. Inevitably, the Jesus they presented was fashioned somewhat in the authors' own images, which meant, in effect, a Jesus who was reasonably "provable." It has to be said, however, that it also meant a Jesus who would not have been too out of place in the faculty lounge of a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant university. There was justice in one observer's tart comment that such a Jesus was "the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well" (Tyrrell 1910, 44).

Protests about the Quest

There were protests. The more conservative Roman Catholics and Protestants never accepted the consensus. More important questions were raised by scholars who came from within the ranks of liberal Protestantism. As we look back from a knowledge of what happened later, four of these protests seem especially significant:

1) In 1892 a scholar named Martin Kähler (1835-1912) produced a short, fiercely written book with a very long title, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Really True, Biblical Christ*. Kähler's protest sprang from a single basic question: What use was the "historical Jesus"? It was not, Kähler observed, the liberal Protestant "Jesus of history" who had power to change his life, but the preached Christ of the church. If the preached Christ was the one with power, it must be the preached Christ who was real. A Jesus established by human scientific research could only, by definition, be human—a "moral" Jesus. He might be a suitable person to imitate, but he could not be Savior.

2) In 1892 another scholar, Johannes Weiss (1863-1914), produced a book called *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. He argued that the announcement of the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' teaching, and that this kingdom was "eschatological." It was a supernatural event, and Jesus expected it to occur in the near future. Weiss' insight about the centrality of the proclamation of the kingdom was undoubtedly correct and of great importance.

3) In 1901 came a different kind of objection. A New Testament scholar named Wilhelm Wrede (1859-1906) produced a book in which he argued that the Gospel According to Mark was not reliable as an unadorned record of historical fact. On the contrary, it was deeply influenced by the dogmatic beliefs of its author. In particular, Wrede found no evidence in the Gospel that Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah or that the life of Jesus was messianic. The Resurrection had convinced the disciples that Jesus was the Messiah. They then read it back into the life, ingeniously inventing the idea of the "messianic secret," according to which (as Mark presents it) no one realized that Jesus was the Messiah because he himself carefully hid it.

4) Finally, Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* showed the extent to which the nineteenth-century "liberal Jesus" had been created by nineteenth-century assumptions. He pointed to the distinctive worldview of first-century Judaism, a view that Jesus naturally shared. Schweitzer claimed this view was dominated by eschatology. There would be a time of suffering, a heavenly figure (the Son of Man) would come, God's kingdom would begin, and the present world would end. Schweitzer thus reinforced the opinions of Weiss. He suggested that Jesus had been mistaken about the near approach of the kingdom, which he had prophesied in the "mission charge" (e.g., Matt. 10:23).

Various details in Schweitzer's view of the ministry of Jesus are easily shown to be wrong. Both source- and form-critical approaches suggest that the Matthean mission charge, on which he hung so much, is among the most composite passages in the whole gospel tradition. More important still, Schweitzer (as he later admitted) knew little of the Jewish sources and depended on studies and collections available in German when he wrote. He appears to have been in error in some of the beliefs he attributed to first-century Judaism. Nonetheless Schweitzer's and Weiss' main contention still stands—namely, that Jesus expected the kingdom, and that his announcement of this can and must be understood in the setting of the hopes and dreams of those around him. Jesus was perceived, by some at least, as a teacher and prophet (cf. Mark 8:27-28). To be that, he must have worked to some extent within the constraints of his culture and the ideas and symbols of his contemporaries.

The Abandonment of the Quest

Any of the objections undermine the basis on which assumptions about the search for the "Jesus of history" rested. Then along came a scholar named Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). It is unlikely that anyone who studies the history of NT interpretation in the twentieth century will fail to hear about Bultmann. If not the greatest, he was surely among the boldest NT scholars of the century. For Bultmann, Wrede was

clearly right. The Gospels enshrined teachings written by those in the early church ("the Hellenistic Christian community") to meet their own needs. The writers did not enshrine the words or ideas of Jesus. To begin with, Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian. In many cases what the Gospels presented as Jesus' teachings were actually utterances by later prophetic teachers "in the name of the risen Lord." These utterances had been added to the authentic sayings of Jesus.

This called into question the possibility of achieving anything significant by searching for a "historical" Jesus. In his book, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Bultmann admitted that there were a few cases in which a saying might be claimed for Jesus with some measure of confidence (1963, 205). But in general he thought that "we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either" (1934, 8).

Was Bultmann a skeptic or an atheist? Neither! Here was the paradox. Bultmann was a believer, sure that God spoke a powerful and redeeming word to him through the Scriptures. Bultmann agreed with Kähler that the preached Christ of the church had power. Unlike Kähler, Bultmann did not think that he could accept the New Testament at its face value as a plain record of historical truth. For all his differences from the nineteenth-century liberal Protestants in his view of the biblical text, he was still one of them. He shared their characteristic assumptions about reality. "It is impossible," he wrote, "to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits" (Bartsch 1953, 5). One might have answered Bultmann (and some did and do) by pointing out that many people in fact do just that (Meier 1994, 11). But we must accept Bultmann's words as stating his own conviction, and they were typical of his age and culture. Many would still agree with him. Liberal Protestantism is not dead, nor are the assumptions about reality on which it was originally based.

Historie* and *Geschichte

What was Bultmann's solution? He made a very important distinction between scientific history (the German word is *Historie*) on the one hand and interpreted history (German: *Geschichte*) on the other. He asserted that we could learn scientific history (*Historie*) from interpreted history (*Geschichte*) only by "demythologizing": that is, by stripping away the mythical language and ideas in which interpreted history (*Geschichte*) is always

dressed. The *Geschichte* (interpreted history) must be "demythologized" to produce *Historie* (scientifically observable history). With that distinction, Bultmann was free to do his work as a scientific historian.

Did that mean that *Geschichte* was valueless? By no means! On the contrary, it was the only kind of history that actually had value. In this Bultmann agreed with Kähler. Scientific history did not lead anyone to the Christ of faith, nor, by definition, could it. Faith in God, and faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, is history interpreted in a certain way. It is, in short, *Geschichte*.[top]

When Bultmann heard or read the biblical "Son of God, Messiah" interpretation of Jesus, it spoke to him as it has spoken to millions. It offered him the chance of what

he called (following the philosopher Martin Heidegger) "authentic existence." The preached Christ was the powerful Christ. But from where did the preached Christ come? In Bultmann's view the preached Christ was created out of the historical event of Rabbi Jesus as that event was understood in the light of Jewish thinking about the end of the world, Greek mystery religions, and a number of other things. Bultmann thought that in the preached Christ, the Word of God came to him. Why, he would have asked, could not the Word of God be spoken through all these things combined? Why could the Holy Spirit not have inspired the Scriptures thus, so that they contain God's Word to us?

Bultmann's questionable skepticism about the historicity of the Gospels should not blind us to the importance of his insistence on distinguishing between observable facts and how we understand the facts. The distinction is found in the Gospels themselves. In Mark, Jesus' acts of healing clearly show to some his God-given authority (Mark 1:27-28; 2:12), but for others the acts merely make it plain that "he has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons" (Mark 3:22). The same events presumably have been seen by everyone. The interpretation is different, and the interpretation is almost everything. What matters is not only the facts, but what we make of the facts.

The interpretation is almost everything: almost, but not quite. There must be something to interpret. Questions asked by the scholars of the Enlightenment mattered and continue to matter. Scientifically observable fact—*Historie*—is important. Without it there is nothing from which to create *Geschichte*, for there is nothing to interpret. Bultmann knew this. He wrote, "The agent of God's presence and activity, the mediator of His reconciliation of the world unto Himself, is a real figure of history" (Bartsch 1953, 44).

Sometimes Bultmann did not take this thought seriously enough. He was at heart still a nineteenth-century liberal, trying to create a *historical* Jesus acceptable to other nineteenth-century liberals. His dealing with the problem of eschatology is a good example. As a scientific historian, Bultmann appears to accept Weiss' and Schweitzer's main point. "There can be no doubt that Jesus like his contemporaries expected a tremendous eschatological drama" (Bultmann 1934, 38). "He took for granted as did his contemporaries that *the Kingdom of God was to come for the benefit of the Jewish people*" (43). As a scientific liberal, however, Bultmann himself obviously could not take seriously such an understanding of eschatology. Neither, of course, could Bultmann's Jesus. So, eight pages later, Bultmann tells us what Jesus actually meant by this: "The coming of the Kingdom of God is therefore not really an event in the course of time, which is due to occur sometime and to which a man can either take a definite attitude or hold himself neutral" (51-52). This may be true for a nineteenth-century liberal, but it has little to do with Jewish eschatological hope in the first century. It flatly contradicted the historical claim that Bultmann had just made. If Jesus shared the hope of his contemporaries for something to benefit the Jewish people, then he expected something to happen in the course of time.

Bultmann's treatment of the Resurrection presented the problem even more acutely. He said of Jesus' Resurrection, "If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord" (Bartsch 1953, 42). This left nothing in the record of alleged scientific history that would be too difficult for a nineteenth-century liberal to swallow. Did Bultmann actually leave himself with enough "scientific history" to explain the "interpretation" (that is, in this case, "the apostolic preaching") to which he was undoubtedly committed? This is a subject to which we return when we discuss the Resurrection.

Reactions to Bultmann

Bultmann's influence was immense. In the 1950s it was commonplace for scholars and academics to talk about the "impossibility" of writing a life of Jesus. For many this was the received wisdom, but by no means for all.

British scholars such as C. H. Dodd (1884-1973) and Vincent Taylor (1887-1967), and Germans such as Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979), used Bultmann's "form-critical" method to produce very different results. Taylor saw no reason to doubt that "substantially the sayings tradition is historically trustworthy" (Taylor 1933, 110). On a famous occasion in 1950 Dodd had a conversation with Paul Tillich on this very subject. He asserted, against Tillich, not only the possibility of historical knowledge about Jesus, but also the necessity of it for Christian faith. There were, he claimed, "two risks" involved for a Christian, "one that the witness of the NT refers to an actual historical figure, and the second that the figure so described is the Christ," and "a historic faith cannot escape either one" (Dillistone 1977, 242).

C. H. Dodd's work on the parables sought to make clear that this part of the tradition, at least, must have its origin in the teaching of Jesus himself. In the course of this work Dodd was also responsible for perhaps the most important single response made to Weiss and Schweitzer. Yellow highlightingIn his short book, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, he challenged Schweitzer's entire exegesis. The message of Jesus, he suggested, was that the kingdom of God had *already* come and was *even now* breaking into history.

The *eschaton* has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation to that of realized experience. It is therefore unsafe to assume that the content of the idea, "The Kingdom of God," as Jesus meant it could be filled in from the speculations of Apocalyptic writers. They were referring to something in the future which could be conceived only in terms of fantasy. He was speaking of that which, in one aspect at least, was an object of experience. (Dodd 1935, 34)

Most scholars now agree that Dodd, in reacting against Weiss and Schweitzer, overplayed his hand. Dodd did, however, have a real point—one without which the NT cannot be properly understood. For the writers of the NT the ancient Jewish hope for something "not yet" is balanced by an "already." Both are at the heart of the Christian proclamation.

A second protest against Bultmann was espoused by some of his own students. In October 1953 Ernst Käsemann delivered a now-famous warning of the perils inherent in the Bultmannian consensus:

Our investigation has led us to the conclusion that we must look for the distinctive element in the earthly Jesus in his preaching and interpret both his other activities and his destiny in the light of this preaching. . . . My own concern is to show that, out of the obscurity of the life story of Jesus, certain characteristic traits in his preaching stand out in relatively sharp relief, and that primitive Christianity united its own message with these . . . . The preaching of the church may be carried on anonymously; the important thing is not the person, but the message. But the Gospel itself cannot be anonymous, otherwise it leads to moralism and

mysticism. The Gospel is tied to him who, both before and after Easter, revealed himself to his own as the Lord, by setting before them the God who is near to them and thus translating them into the freedom and responsibility of faith. (Käsemann 1964, 44, 46)

Admittedly, Käsemann appeared also to be saying that nothing had really changed:

Have not some central points emerged, around which we might, if with the utmost caution and reserve, reconstruct something like a life of Jesus? I should reject such a view as being a misunderstanding . . . . Only an uncontrolled imagination could have the self-confidence to weave out of these pitiful threads the fabric of a history in which cause and effect could be determined in detail (45)

Still, that final qualification—*in which cause and effect could be determined in detail*—was crucial, and set him in principle closer to Dodd than to Bultmann. These scholars granted that much information in the Gospels may be derived from sources other than authentic memory of what Jesus himself said or did. So they experimented with criteria by which it might be possible to distinguish material that originated in the early church or in non-Christian Judaism from material that originated with Jesus. Various criteria were devised. Not all of them won equal acceptance, but two in particular seemed useful.

The "criterion of dissimilarity" or the "criterion of distinctiveness" was used by Bultmann himself (e.g., Bultmann 1963, 205). To put it simply, if a statement said to have been made by Jesus appears to have no parallel either in what we know of first-century Judaism, or in what we know of the ancient world generally, or in what we know of the interests of the early church, then such a saying is likely to be authentic. Why? Because no one—either Jew or Christian—would have had any motive for attributing it to Jesus unless it were known to be historical.[top] An example might be Mark 13:32: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The verse is obviously not in the ordinary sense "Jewish," because it seems to set "the Son" above the angels in heaven. It is

also quite embarrassing from a Christian point of view, since it appears to attribute ignorance to "the Son."

Clearly the criterion of distinctiveness had its limitations. It was always possible that new knowledge might lead us to discover that what we thought unparalleled was not so. In any case, that criterion could hardly have been used alone to build up a useful or even credible picture of anything. Jesus *was*, after all, a Jew, and he *was* followed by those who founded Christianity. The criterion of distinctiveness, if used exclusively, would produce complete absurdity: a Jesus who never said anything either Jewish *or* Christian. We could not even claim that such a Jesus believed in God. This criterion can obviously be used only to supplement other knowledge.

Some scholars suggested a "modified criterion of distinctiveness" by which we might claim reasonable certainty for features in the portrait of Jesus that are offensive to one group if not to the other. Some aspects of Jesus' willingness to accept "sinners" into his fellowship seem to have been shocking to some Jews, although they were acceptable to Christianity. This criterion, however, had its own weaknesses. It still did not allow for the degree of actual continuity among Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity that clearly existed. It had lost the feature that was the main strength of the criterion of distinctiveness, since one side in the Jewish-Christian debate now would have a reason to attribute the view in question to Jesus.

The "criterion of consistency" was of considerably more value. Any single report about Jesus might contain details about whose historical actuality we cannot be sure. It does not follow that we can know nothing for sure about Jesus.

Writers who string together stories which are devised purely to give credit to the hero will succeed only in

presenting a one-sided description of his character, lacking in any real depth or originality; others who are content to collect anecdotes regardless of historical plausibility will fail to portray a character of any consistency.[top] Neither fault can be laid to the evangelists. The Jesus who emerges from their accounts has both originality and consistency—some of the apocryphal gospels, which present by comparison a cardboard figure, offer an instructive contrast. Unless these authors were the most consummate and imaginative artists, able to create a striking and consistent character out of scanty and unreliable sources, we have every reason to think that in broad outline (whatever may be the case with some of the details) the Jesus they portray is the Jesus who actually existed. (Harvey 1982, 5)

On this basis we are bound to feel some confidence not only in the broad outline of the *kerygma* as pointed to by Dodd—the central facts of Jesus' ministry, his teaching, healings, crucifixion, and victory—but also in many important characteristics of the style of that ministry, such as his regular teaching by parables, his acceptance of the ministry of women, and his keeping company with sinners.

A variant of the criterion of consistency is the "principle of multiple attestation." According to this, when a particular saying or episode is witnessed by a number of apparently independent testimonies, it has a good claim to be regarded as authentic. A third movement against the historical skepticism of Bultmann sprang from a deepening impulse among scholars to use Jewish sources as a means of understanding Jesus. Notable among those who have drawn on this material in approaching the NT during the last three decades have been, on the Christian side, W. D. Davies (1964), E. P. Sanders (1985), and Anthony Harvey (1982); and on the Jewish side, Geza Vermes (1973) and the late Samuel Sandmel (1978).

The Present Situation

In the new millennium, the tide of scholarship has thoroughly turned, and the dominant view seems to be, as E. P. Sanders puts it, "that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that these two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism" (1985, 2). So today we find ourselves presented with "lives," or at least serious historical studies, of Jesus almost *ad nauseam*. The history of this work in the last thirty or so years has its own history, with such titles as "the new quest," "Jesus research," and "the third quest" being applied to its different (not necessarily chronologically different) stages and approaches. Virtually everyone agrees that we actually have a great deal of information and evidence relevant to the "historical Jesus." The answer being given, then, to the question that we asked at the beginning of this chapter is generally, "Yes. We believe that we can indeed know something of Jesus as he really was." To that extent the "quest" of the nineteenth-century critics has been justified.

The trick is to understand and evaluate our knowledge—a problem that manifestly is not new (Mark 4:21-22!), although we are led in the light of postmodernist critique to formulate it in new ways. The wealth of data that is available to us is being interpreted in a whole range of ways. We have the skepticism of the "Jesus Seminar," which presents to us Jesus the "laconic sage"—a Jesus who had no eschatological or messianic interests whatever, and whom the evangelists and the early church as a whole completely misunderstood (Funk et al. 1993, 32, cf. 27). We have the projects of scholars such as E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, and N. T. Wright. With (of course) variations in detail, these broadly see Jesus as an eschatological prophet of God's kingdom (Sanders 1985, 123-241; Meier 1994, 289-454; Wright 1996, 145-474).

While individual members of the Jesus Seminar have done valuable work, we must regard their project in general as a fantasy, and their own (and the media's) estimate of its significance as vastly inflated. Just as the liberal Protestant Jesus would have been at home in the faculty rooms of nineteenth-century German liberal Protestant universities, so Jesus the laconic sage, breathtaking in his political correctness, would be at home in the common rooms of the North American universities that produced him. And that is where he belongs

(see Bryan 1996, 348). As historical studies, the projects of Meier, Sanders, and Wright may be the best available on the question of the historical Jesus (see Bryan 1998).

End of chapter

Truth and History[back]

Resisting the temptation to rant about truth being anything but a matter of 1 or 0, or to mention Fox News, I think it's confusing that "history," as used here, is equivalent to *Geschichte*, not *Historie*.

A particular event in historyback

In other words, it really happened.

A theological statement[back]

Neither verifiable nor falsifiable? What nonsense! See 1 Corinthians 15:12. This comes very close to saying that a theological statement is a statement about nothing.

theolgical conclusions/theological questionsback

What does this mean? Is this like saying that they can be cited for edification, but not for doctrine?

And "data" is a vestigial neuter plural, so singular. Right, Chris?

only one universe, in which case... back

Horsepuckey!

Christians did not make much of these problems[back]

Through a combination of the need to get in the turnips and a disinclination to be burned alive.

Since Mark’s is the earliest Gospel...back

Quite likely, but it doesn't logically follow

The preached Jesus having the power[back]

In other words, you've just got to believe. With which I completely agree. But I'd be sorry to see scientific research dismissed, as this article seems to want to do.

Jesus expected the kingdomback

This is a huge assertion to make without any support.

The value of *Geschichte*[back]

If you take this beyond the generalization of "You just have to believe" it becomes, in my opinion, dangerous nonsense.

Authentic existence[back]

I have no idea what this is supposed to mean.

Eschatological drama[back]

Not a view that is presently held without question. And the Gospels go far beyond being a message to the Jews alone.

Impossibility[back]

Somewhere in C.S. Lewis, that the details of such a life have been "withheld."

Authentic memory[back]

Let's get this straight, once and for all. "Authentic" means "looks like," or "accurately in the style of." It doesn't mean "real" or "genuine." Once in Athens I saw a dusty-looking, but well preserved, vase in a shop window. It bore the label "authentic." It did indeed look most authentic, but I doubt it was very old.