

Quests for the Historical Jesus

The Quest

NT scholarship is built on the notion that the NT and similar material represents the writings of a faith community (or communities) that were inspired by Jesus of Nazareth. The material they wrote was shaped by the life of the community and reflected the particular beliefs of those who wrote. Historical interest has largely been about the social/cultural background of the NT writings- either in 2nd temple Judaism or in the early church. But the 'holy grail' of NT historians has been to discover the 'real' Jesus. What was he like? What did he really say? What did he really do? How did he view himself?

Jesus the man has inspired several 'waves' of research, each creating a bandwagon for a time; each trying to avoid mistakes of predecessors; each running into problems.

The Quests

The background to the quests was the numerous 19th century 'portraits of Jesus' that claimed to have been built on the 'assured results of historical research'. These pictures varied, but on the whole portrayed Jesus as a reasonable, liberal-minded, mid-European sort of chap. Educated, cultured and gentle. Not altogether unlike the reasonable, broad-minded scholars who were writing the portraits!

'The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.' George Tyrell 1909

And then there was Schweitzer...

1. **The Quest for the Historical Jesus.** Albert Schweitzer published a book in 1906 which drew on earlier work by Johannes Weiss. He debunked the facile 'portraits of Jesus' because they failed to account for the 'true' picture of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who believed the 'end of the world was nigh'. This 'thorough going eschatology' colours the way we have to interpret Jesus' teachings and parables. Eg Sermon on the Mount only makes sense for disciples living in the 'end times'. Schweitzer later went as a missionary to Africa, but his book had a profound impact on NT studies through the 20th century. It remains a key study that reminds us of 'otherness' of Jesus.

The Quest goes out of fashion: Form-Criticism (which began in the 1920s and reached a peak post war) poured cold water on any attempts to recreate the Jesus of history. Rudolf Bultmann was a notable figure who stressed that all Gospel writings were theological creations of the early church, rather than recollections of Jesus. He saw the historical reconstruction of Jesus as both impossible (because the sources were too fragmentary and heavily altered by the various 'traditions' of the church) and unnecessary (because Christianity was founded on the

proclamation (Kerygma) of the Risen Christ by the early church- not on the teachings of Jesus as such.

2. **The Second Quest.** After some time, this thorough-going scepticism began to wear thin, and some of Bultmann's students become more convinced that there was some value in trace the historical Jesus. This was a more nuanced quest, initiated by Ernst Käsemann's essay in 1954 '*The Problem of the Historical Jesus*'. There was a greater awareness of the need to 'strip away' the redactions and additions of the early church in order to uncover the true Jesus 'hidden' in the gospels. Criteria were developed that purported to distinguish authentic from inauthentic sayings of Jesus.
3. **The Third Quest.** A parallel, slightly later, movement began to gather steam in the 1980s. This was driven less by theological concerns, and more by attempts to use wider historical data to shape the picture of Jesus. Proponents of this sort of quest draw on social-scientific analyses, anthropology, archaeology and non-canonical materials, especially the Gospel of Thomas. The assumption here is that Jesus can be understood if he can be identified with a particular type of religious person of the period. This 'history of religions' approach plays down the role of novelty and assumes that Jesus must have fulfilled a recognised and understood role in his time.
4. **The Jesus Seminar.** In 1985 Robert Funk inaugurated twice-yearly gatherings of scholars engaged in the 'third quest'. The idea was to form a consensus by voting on the authenticity or otherwise of particular sayings of Jesus (using coloured balls!). A genuine attempt at assessing the overall view of several hundred scholars, but difficult to judge what the results mean. Only a handful of verses received the 'definitely authentic' (red ball) vote from all scholars.

Criteria for constructing a picture of Jesus

From the second question onwards there has been widespread interest in identifying the 'authentic' sayings (and later actions) of Jesus. Scholars have assumed that certain criteria would shift these out from later additions or alterations. Among the criteria are:

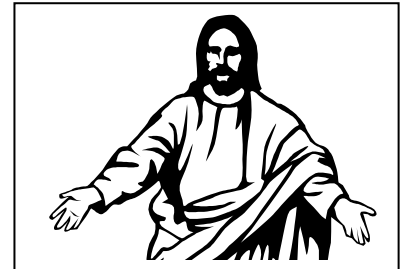
1. **Multiple attestations.** Sayings or events reproduced in more than one gospel are more likely to have come from independent sources and therefore be original.
2. **Embarrassment.** Assumes that sayings or events that did not 'fit' the assumptions and theology of the writers were omitted or altered. Any that remain, must be original as they would hardly have been invented. Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is the main example... others are hard to find.
3. **Dissimilarity.** Traditions that were not key issues for Judaism or the early church may be original because why, otherwise, would they have been invented? This assumes that Jesus didn't draw on issues in Judaism (unlikely) and that he had little influence on the shape of the concerns of the early church (unlikely).

4. **Coherence.** Is this saying /event consistent with others that are accepted as authentic? A working out from what is 'known' based on other criteria.

The strong circularity and subjectivity of these criteria (the best that can be applied) perhaps explains why there are so many very different pictures of the historical Jesus.

Pictures of Jesus

Efforts to reconstruct the life of Jesus have led to many different images of the same man... a warning that all of us tend to stare into the well of history. Nearly all the studies are based on a purely 'human' Jesus and discount any notion of the Christ of Faith.



There are two main strands of development:

1. Jesus as figure within Palestinian Judaism

These accounts use categories available from within the world of first century Judaism, specifically within Palestine.

- (a) Eschatological prophet.** Schweitzer's portrait has remained influential, and has sparked links to the apocalyptic thought of the time (discussed later in this module). In this view, Jesus was convinced that the Kingdom was imminent, but had not yet come. Jesus' initial hopes of seeing the Kingdom arrive gradually gave way to the realisation that he would have to die a martyr's death. E. P. Sanders (1985, 1993) largely agrees with this, but denies that Jesus *intended* to die in Jerusalem- he was the victim of political intrigue.
- (b) Political revolutionary.** Marcus Borg (1994) stresses the spiritual experiences of Jesus that drove to become a prophet of social reform within Judaism. Richard Horsley (see Chilton & Evans 1994) placed Jesus in the context of agrarian society in Palestine, where the poor were taxed by the rich. He argued for no clear division between religion and politics, and that 'apocalyptic' texts were about changing present socio-political realities. Jesus based his vision on the co-operative communities of his local villages in Galilee. Jesus thus related to those of his time who sought to shake off the shackles of both Roman occupation and those who ruled in their place.
- (c) Jewish Rabbi.** Bultmann and others located Jesus within early Rabbinic Judaism- he was a teacher and expounder of the Law. Jesus used many ideas and images familiar to those of this school, but gave his own interpretations.

2. Jesus as a figure outside Palestinian Judaism

These accounts are highly varied, but they all picture Jesus as being unusual within his context- drawing on ideas or role models that were not typical of the time or his origins.

- (a) *Cynic Prophet.*** Cynicism was a Greek philosophical movement dating from 4th century BCE. It was 'world denying' in a similar sense to some of Jesus' teaching. Dominic Crossan (1991) stressed Jesus' Jewish and peasant roots, but believed that he may have picked up Cynic philosophy because Nazareth was close to Sepphoris, a large Graeco-Roman town in Galilee. Crossan bases his argument on, among other things, Jesus' injunction to his disciples not to wear sandals etc. – a typical appearance of Cynic prophets. Crossan stresses, therefore, the socially subversive aspects of Jesus' teaching.
- (b) *Jesus the feminist.*** Feminist interpretations of Jesus have been dominated by the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), who saw Jesus' prime task as subverting the patriarchy of his time. Jesus saw himself as the prophet of Sophia (Wisdom), a feminine image of God in Judaism. He worked co-operatively and proclaimed peace and equality and was violently silenced by the Romans. This revolutionary emphasis was, according to Fiorenza, systematically removed from the Gospels by a church still trapped in patriarchy.
- (c) *The Jesus Seminar.*** Constructing Jesus through the voting patterns of 20th Century biblical scholars has tended, some might say, to produce an image of Jesus that looks remarkably like a 20th Century biblical scholar!

In addition to these reconstructions, there are those that deliberately attempt to link the historical Jesus to the Christ of Faith. Foremost among recent writers has been N T Wright (1996), who sees Jesus as an eschatological figure, but from whom the end is being realised in socio-political transformation of the present. Jesus understood his death as a necessary means to achieving his goal.