1. NEW OPTIONS IN AN OLD QUEST

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Recent scholarship has evidenced a renewed interest in and, more important, confidence about our historical knowledge of Jesus. Marcus Borg has referred to “a renaissance in Jesus studies”; N. T. Wright has called it a third quest, and James Charlesworth has written of “a renewed study of the Jesus of history.” E. P. Sanders reflects the renewed confidence of many scholars: “The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.”

Before beginning an essay of this scope, a caveat is in order. The vast bibliography generated by this topic just in the past ten years cannot be dealt with in the space allotted. I hope to represent fairly the positions of the various scholars without engaging in caricature. Oversimplification goes with the task and the reader should bear that in mind. I am trying in this essay to provide the reader with a tracking of the important options that have shaped research and debate. The sketch follows for the most part the chronology of the question but at the same time is critically systematic.

Stage One: The Life of Jesus

In The Quest of the Historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer pointed to “the critical investigation of the life of Jesus” as “the greatest achievement of German theology.” The English title of his book, apparently the brilliant suggestion of its translator, W. Montgomery, has served as the title for the whole enterprise. Schweitzer also noted that this course of research “has laid down the conditions and determined the course of the religious
thinking of the future.” That prophecy has yet to come true, although it may yet.6

Despite Schweitzer’s prophecy, the relation between the quest of the historical Jesus and Christian faith has been problematic from the beginning. The origins of New Testament critical scholarship lie in the project started by Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768). His research, unpublished in his lifetime because he feared public reaction, had as its goal the demonstration that Christianity was a fraud because it was based on a lie. In Reimarus’s reconstruction Jesus’ disciples stole the body.5 Reimarus’s work was published by Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), who also prepared a response to it, with the intent of proving Christian faith, but of showing how Christianity’s essence was likewise the essence of deism. “Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”7 For both Lessing and Reimarus historical research was at odds with Christian faith.

One of the long-term results of the revolution begun by the printing press was a bifurcation in attitudes towards the Bible. On the one hand, mass production of the Bible in the vernacular made its meaning seem transparent to the contemporary reader. The distance between reader and Bible was foreshortened until it was almost eliminated. The eventual outcome was literalism, fundamentalism, rendering the Bible’s meaning transparent. On the other hand, the printing press and early printers developed the very scholarship that so antagonized the literalists. The need of printers for translations in turn demanded dictionaries, better texts, parallels, and other tools of scholarship. A clash was inevitable.5 Between Gutenberg’s invention (1455) and the publication of Reimarus’s Fragments in 1774 was the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. Thus, the quest is a direct result of cultural shifts brought on by the printing press and the Enlightenment. There is not only a theological interest in Jesus, but also an historical and cultural one.

Schweitzer’s summary of the quest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries narrated their futility. Inevitably, in Schweitzer’s famous image, the reflection at the bottom of the well was that of the historian, not Jesus. For example, David Friedrich Strauss, in his massive Das Leben Jesu, sought to demonstrate the mythological character of the gospels. While this life of Jesus was the negative, critical part of his program, the positive was essentially a Hegelian substitution.6 Even Schweitzer’s own program had an anti-Christian edge. Although he sought to discredit the liberal lives of Jesus, his apocalyptic messiah was unfit as a basis for traditional Christian faith.7 Hans Conzelmann summarized this aspect of the quest in the first sentence of an article on Jesus: “The historical and substantive presupposition for modern research into the life of Jesus is emancipation from the traditional christological dogma on the basis of the principle of reason.”8

A search for a firm foundation on which to build has been an essential mark of the quest in all its stages. Since the first stage sought a biography of Jesus, solving the synoptic problem began with Lessing. Markan priority, which argued that Mark’s Gospel was the earliest and that the other gospels were dependent on it, seemed to offer a firm foundation on which to construct a biography of Jesus. Furthermore, unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark did not have embarrassing birth narratives or resurrection appearances. What brought to a halt this quest to write a biography was Wilhelm Wrede’s Messianic Secret (1901), in which he argued that Jesus’ silencing of his identity as the Messiah was a Markan strategy to account for the fact that the confession of Jesus as the Messiah actually resulted from post-Easter Christian confession. Thus, the plot of the first Gospel was Mark’s, not a product of historical memory.9 If the plot of the first Gospel was a product of imagination and not memory, then no reliable basis for a biography of Jesus existed. The sequence of events will be forever a mystery.

The demonstration of the impossibility of a biography of Jesus is a permanent achievement of this first stage of the quest and was further reinforced by two important works of the post World War I era. K. L. Schmidt, in his Der Rahmen Geschichte Jesu (The Outline of the History of Jesus), demonstrated that the connecting links between the individual units (pericopes) of Mark’s Gospel were the product of the author.10 So the author was responsible for both the plot (messianic secret) and outline. Finally, the development of form criticism in the 1920s highlighted the creative powers of early Christian communities and the importance of their situation (Sitz im Leben) in the development of the
oral tradition. Form criticism reduced still more the ability to write a life of Jesus by questioning the tradition’s reliability on the basis of the creative power of oral tradition.

Martin Kähler crafted the most important theological response to the first quest and the title of his book summarizes his program: The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ. Since historical criticism could not deliver the assured and certain results that faith required, Kähler built a wall of separation between Jesus as reconstructed by the historians and the Christ of faith to which the Bible witnessed. This wall pronounced the historical Jesus irrelevant to Christian faith and thus diminished interest in such research. In Bultmann’s famous statement, “The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament.” The quest went to sleep for a while.

A permanent gain of the first stage was the rejection of the effort to write a biography of Jesus. We do not and never will have materials for a real biography of Jesus.

Stage Two: The Message

The quest in Germany flared up under the aegis of the “New Quest” of the historical Jesus. The New Quest was allied with the new hermeneutics, both products of the Bultmann school, a group of German and American scholars in the period after World War II. The New Quest sought to overcome Kähler’s gaping abyss by attacking the implicit docetism in the separation of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith by stressing as a historical concern the identification of the crucified and risen Lord. In a seminal essay, Ernst Käsemann wrote, “The question of the historical Jesus is, in its legitimate form, the question of the continuity of the times and within the variation of the kerygma.” The gospel, which exposes an existential understanding of being, unifies the historical Jesus and the preaching of the church. “[T]he real history of Jesus is always happening afresh; it is now the history of the exalted Lord, but it does not cease to be the earthly history it once was, in which the call and claim of the Gospel are encountered.” As Leander Keck has pointed out, the New Quest was only following clues already planted by Bultmann. Even though the New Quest was mostly a German Protestant enterprise, the most significant study of Jesus’ message produced under the influence of the New Quest was by a Roman Catholic Dutch theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus: An Experiment in Christology.

The interest in the kerygma led to the New Quest’s distinctive interest in Jesus’ message and his sayings. In the previous generation, form criticism had successfully isolated these sayings. Just as the first stage sought to secure a sure foundation for a life of Jesus, this second stage tried to lay a foundation by authenticating the sayings of Jesus. Norman Perrin, in Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus, produced the most influential examination of criteria. His formulation of the criterion of dissimilarity has become classic: “The earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church.” This criterion was for Perrin the strongest one and produced the most characteristic message of Jesus. Thus, what was distinctive about Jesus “will be found not in the things which he shares with his contemporaries, but in the things wherein he differs from them.”

The New Quest had a built-in contradiction at its heart. It relied on the criterion of dissimilarity to establish its sure foundation and to overcome what it saw as the docetic division created by Kähler’s split between Jesus and the Christ. Yet the criterion of dissimilarity demanded a separation between Jesus and Christ, and between Jesus and Judaism.

While form critics were not interested in the quest, Joachim Jeremias’s studies, built on their results, provided an extremely important bridge to the third stage of the quest. First published in German in 1947 and translated into English in 1954, his Die Gleichnis Jesu went through eight editions, with three revisions in English. Jeremias rejected Kähler’s position and claimed historical method for the service of Christian faith. For him, the parables were “the original rock of tradition,” and he sought to “arrive at the earliest attainable form of Jesus’ parabolic teaching” because “[o]nly the Son of Man and his word can invest our message with full authority.” For Jeremias, the quest is not something to fear as antagonistic to Christian faith; it is a kind of sacrament that
makes Jesus present. “We stand right before Jesus when reading his parables.” This common sense basis, devoid of the arcane German distinction between historisch (“historical”) and geschichtlich (“historic”), appealed to the common sense tradition of both Great Britain and the United States.

The trajectory of scholarship represented by Jeremias, extending back to Adolf Jülicher through C. H. Dodd, was continued in the United States by Robert Funk, Dan O. Via Jr., John Dominic Crossan, and the present author. Jeremias had pursued a form of critical analysis along historical lines that sought to reconstruct the Aramaic ipsissima verba (“actual words”) of Jesus. Funk and Via introduced the concerns of American New Criticism and literary theory into the debate. They were able to move beyond the old quest by introducing new methods that raised new hermeneutical concerns. Even though at times highly indebted to German scholarship, both set the quest on indigenous American grounds. This American line of parable study gradually arrived at a consensus of Jesus the teacher of subversive wisdom that has underlain much of the quest’s third stage.

Jeremias’s English student, Perrin, who taught at the University of Chicago, pursued a second line of development. In a series of studies, Perrin explored the kingdom of God. Perrin employed the methods of literary theory and especially the understanding of symbol developed by Philip Wheelwright to redefine kingdom as a symbol, rather than as a concept whose meaning could be determined by historical analysis.

This called into question the understanding of the kingdom of God, dominant since Johannes Weiss and Schweitzer, as an apocalyptic cipher for the literal end of the world. Perrin advanced this argument by calling into question the apocalyptic assumption. Even though he was a student of Jeremias, he was closer to Dodd’s realized eschatology. Conflict over the timetable of the kingdom and its lack of resolution is a defining marker of the third stage.

The Third Stage: The Jewish Jesus

Jeremias and the tradition that followed in his wake had taken the study of Jesus’ message as far as it could go. Unlike the quest’s first stage, the second one did not so much reach bankruptcy as a dead end. A new stage demanded progress in three areas: (1) new data was needed to overcome the interpretive impasses; (2) new methods were needed, not only because historical methods had failed to provide a sure foundation, but also because the social sciences were penetrating New Testament scholarship; and (3) new models were needed to understand Jesus. Jesus the preacher had been exhausted.

Clearly the quest now is at a new stage that attempts to meet these three challenges in various ways. What best typifies this third stage is an effort to understand, first, Jesus as a Jew within the context of the diversification of second temple Judaism and, second, the forces that generated the plurality of the pre-Constantine Jesus tradition. If stage one sought a biography and stage two tried to isolate Jesus’ message, the third stage seeks a synchronic Jesus, enmeshed in the systems of both Judaism and early Christianity.

Charismatic Hasid

In the 1970s important studies by Geza Vermes and Morton Smith jump-started the third stage because they provided both new models and new data outside the sayings tradition. The title of Vermes’s book denotes the twin thrust of his work: Jesus the Jew, A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels. Vermes, typical of third questers, acts as a historian and is not timid about history’s abilities. Since Vermes is a Jew, he does not approach the quest from a Christian perspective. For him Jesus is a Jew, not a Jew who founds Christianity. In itself this is not surprising, except one should remember that the use of the criterion of dissimilarity had led to an image of Jesus in which “he cannot be integrated into the background of the Jewish piety of his time.”

Vermes attacks both poles of the criterion of dissimilarity. He takes the evidence the gospels present about Jesus, thus accepting continuity with the early community, and then attempts to explain that evidence on the basis of Galilean Judaism, thereby making Jesus intelligible within Judaism. “The Synoptists are unanimous in presenting him as an exorcist, healer and teacher. They also emphasize that the deepest impression made by Jesus on his contemporaries resulted from his
mastery over devils and disease, and the magnetic power of his preaching. The New Quest had dealt more with the “meaning” of Jesus’ teaching, whereas Vermes emphasizes the “power.” Furthermore, the New Quest had virtually ignored the exorcisms and healings, whereas Vermes puts them at the center. For him, Jesus is an example of the Galilean holy man in charismatic Judaism. He is a product, not of rabbinic, but of common Judaism, from the villages.

Jesus exemplifies the miracle-working holy man, a well-established pattern in Judaism. “The pattern set by the miracle-working prophets Elijah and Elisha was first of all applied by postbiblical tradition to other saints of the scriptural past; they, too, were credited with powers of healing and exorcism deriving not from incantations and drugs or the observance of elaborate rubrics, but solely from speech and touch.” Jesus fits in with Honi the Circle-Drawer (circa first century B.C.E.), mentioned in both rabbinic texts and Josephus, and Hanina ben Dosa (prior to 70 C.E.). Both were well known for their ability to influence God through prayer. A single story referred to by Vermes can stand for this charismatic tradition of the holy man:

When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa prayed, a poisonous reptile bit him, but he did not interrupt his prayer. They [the onlookers] departed and found the same “snake” dead at the opening of its hole. “Woe to the man,” they exclaimed, “bitten by a snake, but woe to the snake which has bitten Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa.”

Vermes himself has found that “the chief finding of Jesus the Jew is the recognition of Jesus within the earliest Gospel tradition, prior to Christian theological speculation, as a charismatic prophetic preacher and miracle worker, the outstanding ‘Galilean Hasid.’” This chief finding, Vermes’s contribution to the quest, is hard to overestimate because it has changed the options. Whereas the New Quest had put the theological question at the center in reaction to Kähler, Vermes sets aside the theological issue. He is neither for nor against Christian claims on behalf of Jesus. They are irrelevant to his historical portrait of Jesus the Jew. More important, he demonstrates that Jesus did make sense within the context of first-century Judaism situated within the Hasid tradition, a popular rather than elite tradition. The full significance of this social location will only become evident with the addition of the social sciences to the historian’s toolbox.

The downside of Vermes’s study is that, in the end, he overlooks or ignores the genuine accomplishments of the form critics. In his effort to take the Gospels seriously, he tends at times to take them too much at face value. Too much is explained by his model of charismatic Judaism, and he does not sufficiently allow for development or dependence within the Gospel tradition.

The Magician

Morton Smith’s Jesus the Magician has not had the influence of Vermes’ work, probably because it has a more threatening edge to Christian theology. In that sense, Smith’s work belongs in the tradition of Reimarus and is reminiscent of that earlier program. He sees Jesus as a magician emerging from the syncretistic environment of Galilee. At Jesus’ baptism he receives a magic spirit and becomes a (son of) God, then studies magic in Egypt and gives enchanted food to his followers. Under Paul’s influence the heretical sect founded by Jesus swings back toward more conventional religious practices, and the Gospel writers began to cover up the clues. But Smith, with the help of the Egyptian magical papyri and Jewish magical books, claims to have correctly ferreted out the remaining clues. Like Reimarus, Smith claims Christianity was founded on a deceit.

If this were the extent of Smith’s book, one might be tempted to dismiss it as bias. But Smith was a serious scholar, and his discovery of Secret Mark is a major, though controversial, contribution to New Testament studies. His study of Jesus as magician makes an important contribution and represents both the strengths and weaknesses of the quest’s third stage.

In comparison with Vermes, who views the miracle-working activity within the confines of charismatic Judaism, Smith views both Judaism and Christianity within the context of the Roman Empire. This difference between Vermes and Smith represents an important shift in some of the third stage studies. To borrow an analogy from science, the world
looks different through a microscope (close view), or seen from earth (middle view), or from space (long view). A similar problem exists here. The New Quest took a close view, Vermes a middle one, and Smith a long one. At a close level, differentiation stands out; at a middle level, Jesus the Jew appears; and from a long view, Judaism, Jesus, and early Christianity find their context in the swirling currents of the Roman Empire. Like Vermes, Smith departs from the tracks laid down by the New Quest by starting with the miracle tradition. The miracle worker model accounts for the details of Jesus’ life.

A man who can do miracles is thought to have some sort of supernatural power... [H]is power is thought holy... [H]is sayings and actions will be remembered... If his followers begin to think him the Messiah, and if they become so numerous and enthusiastic as to frighten the civil authorities, he will soon be in serious trouble. Thus the rest of the tradition about Jesus can be understood if we begin with the miracles.

Beginning with the miracles soon produces an explanation of the rise of early Christianity. On the other hand, Smith argues that the miracles remain unintelligible if one begins with the sayings. In the rabbinic tradition, which is almost devoid of miracles, teachers of the Torah were not "made over into miracle workers." The same is true for apocalyptic sayers. A miracle worker, however, could easily come to be thought a prophet and an authority on the Law." Therefore, these other understandings of Jesus are later developments from this one model of the miracle worker.37

Smith draws heavily on the parallels with Apollonius of Tyana, a contemporary of Jesus whom Philostratus portrays more as a philosopher than a miracle worker.38 Smith analyzes not only the parallels between Jesus and Apollonius, but also the attacks on the two. In Jesus’ case, Smith takes Celsius’s attack on Christianity as representing not just the opposition to Christianity in the last half of the second century, but also an earlier Jewish attack on Jesus. For example, since both a late rabbinic story and Celsius report that Jesus studied magic in Egypt, Smith argues that this story goes back to Jesus’ historical opponents and that Matthew’s story of a flight to Egypt attempts to cover it up. There are many problems with this proposal, not the least of which is that Celsius must be reconstructed from Origen’s comments and the rabbinic text is late and less than sure. So one should take Smith’s argument as very tendentious. Nevertheless, this type of argument is important if used more selectively. There is nothing improbable about Jewish propaganda against early Christianity. There certainly was Christian propaganda against Judaism, as the Gospels indicate.

Smith makes a strong case for the centrality of the miracle tradition in understanding the historical Jesus. While magic is a pejorative term and Smith opts for an outsider’s view of Jesus as the correct one, nevertheless magic and the miraculous were widespread and fundamental in the ancient world, and the distinction between the two is often a matter of taste.39 In a very intriguing study of Jesus’ miraculous activity, A. E. Harvey remarks on its notable ambiguity. The exorcisms would clearly leave Jesus open to charges of sorcery. Harvey concludes that this ambiguity on the part of Jesus was deliberate. Furthermore, he sees the synoptic recounting of the miracle tradition as unlike other comparable Hellenistic parallels in its attitude. “They [the Gospels] do not exaggerate the miracle or add sensational details, like the authors of early Christian hagiography; but nor do they show the kind of detachment, amounting at times to scepticism, which is found in Herodotus or Lucian and even to a certain extent in Philostratus.”40

In the end, it is not Smith’s anti-Christian bias that undoes him. Such a bias is no more problematic than the counterbias of Christian scholars. It falls to the scholarly discipline to filter out the bias of individual scholars. More problematic is the totalizing aspect of his model and the lumping together without discrimination the various Gospel portraits to construct an outline of Jesus’ life. The positive gains of the earlier scholarship just cannot be set aside to fit a totalizing theory.

Restorer of the Temple
E. P. Sanders’s Jesus and Judaism should probably be noted as the first full-scale study of the quest’s third stage. Sanders came to this study as an established student of Judaism and a major scholar on Paul.41 He
takes a middle view, positioning Jesus within the context of second temple Judaism and, even though he sees as the key issue the explanation of the death of Jesus, the Roman Empire seldom comes into view. The cause of the death of Jesus is not Rome, but Jewish (Sadducean) authorities.

The search for a sure foundation has marked the quest in each stage, always threatened by the very nature of the material available for investigation. Sanders sets out in advance what is required of a good hypothesis to explain the historical Jesus. First, "it should situate Jesus believably in Judaism and yet explain why the movement initiated by him eventually broke with Judaism." Characteristic of the third stage, Jesus is a Jew and must make sense as a Jew. But at the same time the seeds for the eventual break between Christianity and Judaism should be found in Jesus and not just in the early community. The second important aspect of a good hypothesis is that "it should offer a connection between his activity and his death." There are four interrelated elements in Sanders's reconstruction: (1) "what Jesus had in mind," (2) "how he saw his relationship to his nation," (3) "the reason for his death," and (4) "the beginning of the Christian movement."^{42}

Sanders rejects the sayings tradition as a firm foundation for two reasons. First, he does not believe that there exists a consensus among scholars "on the authenticity of the sayings material, either in whole or in part." Second, starting with the sayings leads to the assumption that Jesus was a teacher. In Sanders's judgment one cannot satisfactorily account for "the conclusion and aftermath of his career" with such a starting point, because people are not put to death for words but deeds. "[T]he teaching material in the Gospels has not yielded a convincing historical depiction of Jesus—one which sets him firmly in Jewish history, which explains his execution, and which explains why his followers formed a persecuted messianic sect."^{43}

Having rejected the sayings tradition as a sure foundation on which to build his hypothesis, Sanders posits what he takes to be an indubitable foundation stone. For Sanders "the principal context" of Jesus' work is Jewish eschatology: "[T]he line from John the Baptist to Paul and the other early apostles is the line of Jewish eschatology and it would be misleading to move the centre of our investigation off that line." This assumption is absolutely essential to Sanders's sure foundation, and the line from John the Baptist to Jesus to Paul can be considered the canonical line. The second element in Sanders's sure foundation is a list of eight facts he considers beyond doubt about Jesus, out of which he selects "Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple" as the best sure fact on which to begin because of its interconnection with the death of Jesus. Sanders's confidence is high: Jesus' temple controversy "offers almost as good an entry for the study of Jesus and his relationship to his contemporaries as would a truly eyewitness account of the trial."^{44}

Having set a firm foundation, Sanders must admit "that the question of Jesus and the temple brings with it the amount of uncertainty which is usual in the study of the Gospels." First, he must oppose the opinion that what Jesus was about was cleansing the temple, ""Those who write about Jesus' desire to return the temple to its 'original,' 'true' purpose, the 'pure' worship of God, seem to forget that the principal function of any temple is to serve as a place for sacrifice, and that sacrifices require the supply of suitable animals." Yet the interpretation of the temple act as a cleansing goes back at least as far as Mark (11:17). For Sanders, Jesus' temple act "symbolized destruction."

We should suppose that Jesus knew what he was doing: Like others, he regarded the sacrifices as commanded by God, he knew that they required a certain amount of trade, and he knew that making a gesture towards disrupting the trade represented an attack on the divinely ordained sacrifices. Thus I take it that the action at the very least symbolized an attack, and note that "attack" is not far from "destruction."^{45}

Sanders bases his argument not only on the inner logic of his argument but also on what he takes as an "accurate memory of the principal point on which Jesus offended many of his contemporaries," namely, the threat to destroy the temple and in three days to rebuild it.^{46} Ironically, the Gospels specifically refer to this as a false witness.

Sanders's reconstruction of Jewish eschatology provides the interpretative lock in his building block. "Jewish eschatology" and "the
restoration of Israel’ are almost synonymous;” and a primary element in the restoration of Israel is the restoration of the temple. “The kingdom was at hand, and one of the things which that meant was that the old temple would be replaced by a new one,” Sanders explains, even though he knows that the evidence on Jewish eschatology is neither that conclusive nor universal. Yet this version of restoration eschatology, in his judgment, makes the best sense of Jesus’ association with John the Baptist, his temple action and the aftermath it provoked, the resurrection, the belief of his disciples in his messiahship, and the gentile mission.

Sanders’s proposal has provoked a lively debate. Jacob Neusner agrees with Sanders that Jesus’ temple act was a symbolic action, but for him it was symbolic for the disciples, not the crowds. Jesus was trying to demonstrate to his disciples that the temple sacrifices should be replaced by the Eucharist, the tables of the money changers should be exchanged for tables of the Eucharist. Neusner’s proposal has not gained wide support because it is hard to understand why the Christian Gospels would not reflect such a meaning if such were the original. Craig Evans faces Sanders’s proposal even more directly. “It seems to me that the tendency of the tradition would be exactly the opposite of what Sanders has proposed. Had Jesus’ action indeed been designed to signify the temple’s impending doom, we should expect that the evangelist Mark, if no one else, would have interpreted his actions as portending exactly that meaning.” Why then if Jesus’ action originally involved the destruction of the temple, would the evangelists in a post-70 C.E. situation, after the actual destruction of the temple, picture it as a cleansing? Furthermore, a cleansing motif is plausible in Jesus’ historical context. The ruling priests were viewed as corrupt and the Essenes were a group who viewed the temple as in need of cleansing. Evans also rejects Sanders’s reconstruction of eschatology:

“[T]here is no evidence whatsoever that a messiah or prophet or other eschatological figure was expected to destroy the Temple as a necessary prelude to building a new one. The evidence that a messiah was expected to build a new Temple is itself poorly attested (especially for the pre-70 C.E. period), never mind build a new one when the old one was still standing, indeed was undergoing extensive remodeling.”

Others have gone even further. Bruce Chilton, while agreeing with Evans’s critique of Sanders, has argued for a Pharisaic background to explain the temple action: “It was an occupation designed to prevent the sacrifice of animals acquired on the site, in trading that involved commerce within the Temple and obscured the Pharisaic understanding that such animals were to be fully the property of Israel (as distinct from the priesthood or the Temple).” While Chilton’s proposal is very suggestive, its main problem is that he makes Jesus over into a Pharisee. The placement of Jesus by Vermes and Smith in the common and not the elite tradition remains convincing.

George Wesley Buchanan and David Seeley have attacked the authenticity of the temple action itself. Buchanan attacks its historical probability as described in the Gospels.

Would military policemen, without reacting, allow a man or group of men to come into this strategic, defended area and start an upheaval which involved driving people out of the building and overturning the furniture? . . . With the long history of conflict associated with feasts at Jerusalem against which Rome was well prepared, how could Jesus have been allowed to have walked away unmolested after this turmoil had taken place (Mark 11.19)?

Seeley attacks the authenticity by forcibly arguing that Mark created the incident and that it fits his schema of blaming Judaism for the death of Jesus. If Mark composed the incident, why present it as a cleansing rather than a destruction?

To suggest that the Messiah and the temple represented mutually exclusive modes of salvation would simply not make sense to any of Mark’s readers familiar with Jewish thought. This would be especially true if those readers were still feeling the grief and shock which many must have experienced in the wake of the temple’s destruction. . . . He had to insinuate smoothly and relatively unobtrusively the notion that Jesus’ coming means the temple’s end.
Buchanan and Seeley clearly demonstrate that one cannot assume the historicity of the temple incident and that good evidence calls it into question. However, as Robert Miller has pointed out, even if Mark fails as historical, Thomas 71 keeps the issue alive. How one evaluates that evidence depends on one’s judgment about the dependence of Thomas on the synoptics.

The power of Sanders’s reconstruction is also its weakness. He has taken an apparently simple and what he thought was an incontestable fact, Jesus’ temple activity, and used it as a starting point from which to weave out in ever enlarging circles a whole cloth. Yet the lively debate that has surrounded Sanders’s proposal only indicates that a sure foundation, a fortress beyond attack, is not to be found.

Sanders has continued the tendency of the third stage of placing the deeds in the forefront. Even more, he has raised in a forceful form the question of eschatology, a topic at the center of neither Vermes’s nor Smith’s analyses. Sanders sets out an eminent apocalyptic eschatology reminiscent of Schweitzer’s view. Chilton among others has noted the irony of Sanders’s position. Sanders disdains the sayings in favor of the deeds “and then proceeds to use an explicitly dogmatic context in order to interpret those deeds.” Chilton accuses Sanders of the same anachronism as Schweitzer, of using later apocalyptic documents to “comprehend the motivation of Jesus.”

There is also a curious anomaly in Sanders’s reconstruction. He sets the temple event at the center of Jesus’ activity and portrays an imminent coming of the kingdom to destroy the old temple and rebuild a new one. Yet he insists that Jesus was apolitical. It is hard to see how a deed as provocative as the temple action and the preaching of a basileia (empire, kingdom) can be apolitical.

The failure of Sanders’s project demonstrates the problem with a method that is simply historical. Sanders’s historical methodology has a traditional, almost positivistic cast as evidenced by his disdain for the sayings tradition. Literary criticism and the social sciences make no appearance. Documents are investigated in an almost Holmesian fashion. But is it so clear that history is so deterministic and lockstep? In the Roman Empire, justice was so marginal that one does not need much of an explanation for the death of a Galilean peasant.

In 1993 Sanders published The Historical Figure of Jesus. While this book lacks for the most part the scholarly apparatus of footnotes, it is not a simplified version of the earlier book, but a major reconsideration of his case for Jesus as a radical eschatologist. Since the publication of Jesus and Judaism, the third stage of the quest was now well underway. Sanders learned from the debate, so his second work is a good marker of fundamental fault lines in the quest.

Sanders has abandoned his eight so-called indisputable facts. These proved more controversial than he probably anticipated. This points out how problematic and elusive is the search for a sure foundation.

For Sanders the linchpin is Jesus’ eschatological program and its strongest support is what he takes to be the unbreakable line between John, Jesus, and Paul. This argument is a key marker of a major fault line in the third quest, so one should pay close attention to it. Sanders makes this argument even more explicit in The Historical Figure of Jesus. I will condense his argument:

John really did baptize Jesus. This, in turn, implies that Jesus agreed with John’s message: it was time to repent in view of the coming wrath and redemption.

Paul fiercely disputed some points with other Christians, but not this one. They all believed that Jesus would establish a kingdom in the very near future, in their lifetimes.

At the beginning of Jesus’ career, then we find him accepting the mission of John the Baptist, who said that the climax of history was at hand. Within no more than a decade after Jesus’ execution, we have firm proof that his followers expected this dramatic event very soon. Jesus must fit this context. This context is historically crucial, since it is the framework of Jesus’ overall mission: it includes the man who baptized him, and also his own followers.

Sanders thus maintains that without exception all early Christians accepted the apocalyptic worldview. It should come as no surprise that Q The Synoptic Sayings Source is never mentioned in The Historical Figure of Jesus. In Studying the Synoptic Gospels (with Margaret Davies),
he opts for a complicated solution to the synoptic problem that basically eliminates Q. Sanders and Davies refer to "believers in Q." "Now a few scholars are again attempting to define Q as a document: it really existed, it directly reflects the theology of a community. . . . This work is mostly of curiosity value, since it shows how far a hypothesis can be pushed despite its lack of fundamental support."60 Of course, with the dismissal of Q and the insistence that all early Christians are apocalyptic in orientation, the wisdom tradition is not only set aside, but its existence is denied. Sanders does admit that the Gospel of Thomas is an early gospel, although he does not say how early: "Of all the apocryphal material, only some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are worth consideration."61 He never identifies these sayings and, aside from this reference to the Gospel of Thomas, Sanders makes no other mention of it.

Three key issues emerge here that define the debate. First, what I have termed the canonical line of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul form an axis for the apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus. Second, there is the status of Q. Does it exist and does it represent an early community and maybe the earliest witness to Jesus? And, finally, is the Gospel of Thomas independent of the synoptic Gospels? How one answers these three issues has become determinative for the picture of Jesus that emerges in the third quest.

A Spirit-Filled Jesus

In Jesus, A New Vision, Marcus Borg attempts to avoid the historical constraints that plagued Sanders's proposal. He does not seek to confine Jesus to a single model but sees Jesus as "a charismatic who was a healer, sage, prophet, and revitalization movement founder."62 He also rejects the apocalyptic model as the appropriate way to understand Jesus' eschatological language.

Following in the tradition of Vermes and Smith, the charismatic aspect determines the other models of healer, sage, etc. The ancients believed in two worlds, an everyday world and a spirit-filled world. For them, the spirit world was the "real" one, while for us it tends not to exist, to be suspect, or to be at a distance. "[T]he heart of the biblical tradition is 'charismatic,' its origin lying in the experience of Spirit-endowed people who became radically open to the other world and whose gifts were extraordinary." Jesus was extraordinarily open to this other world, this spirit reality. Borg, for example, takes the baptism and resulting vision along with the testing as historical. "Indeed, the sequence of initiation into the world of the Spirit (the baptism) followed by a testing or ordeal in the wilderness is strikingly similar to what is reported of charismatic figures cross-culturally."63 Borg here marks a methodological fault line running through the third stage. Does the model (or models) derive from the data or does the model determine what the data is? Sanders clearly belongs to the first group, which is why he looks so assiduously for a sure foundation and finally settles on the canonical line of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul. Borg belongs to the latter group.

Borg seems little concerned with issues of authenticity. What fits with the model of the charismatic is judged as somehow historical. His treatment of the baptism illustrates this. The sequence of baptism/initiation and testing is judged historical because it fits the cross-cultural model of the charismatic. Likewise, "about the historicity of the baptism and the vision itself, there is little reason for doubt," although one could doubt the heavenly voice since it coheres so well with post-Easter Christology. However, if beloved son "is given the meaning which similar expressions have in stories of other Jewish charismatic holy men, then it is historically possible to imagine this as part of the experience of Jesus."64 One of the weaknesses of the criterion of dissimilarity is that it relies on an interpretive model to indicate what is dissimilar. As the example of the heavenly voice indicates, if beloved son means "unique son of God," then one would judge the heavenly voice as later. But Borg attempts to construct an argument that makes it historically plausible. Yet the most important question is whether it should be so interpreted in this situation, not just whether it can. This is precisely the question that has plagued the third stage in its effort to overcome the gulf between Jesus and the Gospels.

One of Borg's important contributions is his discussion of the politics of holiness and Jesus' response to it. This developed out of his doctoral dissertation and a later monograph. Borg sees the politics of holiness as a response to the situation of Roman occupation, thus taking
a longer view as the context for Jesus the Jew. As a further development of the “holiness code,” it sought to answer the question how Israel could be holy while occupied by Rome. Holiness was equated with separation from all that would defile holiness. “The Jewish social world and its conventional wisdom became increasingly structured around the polarities of holiness as separation: clean and unclean, purity and defilement, sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner.”

A politics of holiness gave rise to a number of renewal movements, among them the Essenes and the Pharisees. Jesus responded to this politics of holiness as separation with a politics of compassion that emphasized inclusiveness. “Just as God is moved by and ‘feels with’ the ‘least of these,’ so the Jesus movement was to participate in the pathos of God. Indeed, the pathos of God as compassion was to be the ethos of the Jesus movement and, ideally, of Israel.” The politics of compassion is open to all. Borg builds on the picture of Jesus as a teacher of subversive wisdom that had emerged from the study of the parables, referred to above, and the aphorisms, as well as his social practice of inclusion at meals.

While Borg should be applauded for situating Judaism and Jesus within the larger context of the Roman Empire, the politics of holiness versus a politics of compassion seems to be a straw man. It stacks the deck against Judaism. Since Borg is unconcerned with issues of authenticity, he does not have to demonstrate that Jesus preached compassion. The model justifies its conclusion. Yet compassion seems to be more a theme of Matthew’s Gospel than Jesus’ preaching. But Borg has put his finger on an important question—the centrality of the purity code in first-century Judaism.

Borg has advertised what he takes to be a consensus in the third quest that Jesus’ message was noneschatological (i.e., that he did not expect the end of the world). I am not sure how a consensus is established, and certainly of those studied to this point, Sanders as well as Vermes would not join such a consensus, although Helmut Koester has recently acknowledged the consensus. Borg’s announcement, coupled with the work of Crossan and the Jesus Seminar, has set off a firestorm of debate on this issue.

Borg correctly notes that the linchpin holding the older consensus together was the so-called future Son of man sayings. As long as these were understood as deriving from the historical Jesus, whether he understood himself as the Son of man or some other future agent, it placed a world-ending eschatology at the debate’s center. Sanders clearly recognizes this point and has made a spirited defense of the historicity of the Son of man sayings: “Jesus originally said that the Son of Man would come in the immediate future, while his hearers were alive.” But beginning with Perrin’s work, the Son of man sayings have increasingly been understood as the product of the early church.

Douglas Hare’s study seems very convincing on this point. This non-end-of-the-world Jesus has been reinforced further by studies on the kingdom of God and parables and aphorisms, beginning with Dodd and Perrin, that increasingly have rejected such an eschatology as the correct interpretive key and turned toward Jewish wisdom as the proper one.

**Mediterranean Jewish Peasant**

John Dominic Crossan’s *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* may be the most significant study of Jesus in the twentieth century. Crossan has been prolific and creative throughout his whole career. He has followed *The Historical Jesus* with several important studies, most notably *The Birth of Christianity*.

If Sanders’s *Jesus and Judaism* represents the historian’s quest for the historical Jesus, Crossan’s *Historical Jesus* represents the fullest treatment to date of what might be called an interdisciplinary quest. It also demonstrates how controversial this third stage of the quest can be, for it envisions a radically different reconstruction of early Christianity. In that sense, Crossan follows in the footsteps of Strauss. Crossan’s methodology is consciously interdisciplinary. It involves the reciprocal interplay of a macrocosmic level using cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology, a mesocosmic level using Hellenistic or Greco-Roman history, and a microcosmic level using the literature of specific sayings and deeds, stories and...
anecdotes, confessions and interpretations of Jesus. All three levels, anthropological, historical, and literary, must cooperate fully and equally for an effective synthesis.79

Crossan came to this study after producing a significant body of work on the sayings tradition,76 and so he does not share Sanders’s distrust of it. Yet he too seeks a firm foundation on which to build his study. Crossan arrives at his foundation by constructing an inventory of the Jesus tradition. Unlike most scholars who restrict their analysis to the Gospels or the synoptics, Crossan casts his net across all the extant literature of Christianity prior to 150 C.E. These documents are then arranged in strata according to their time of composition.77 Crossan constructs four strata: 30–60, 60–80, 80–120, 120–150 C.E. After the documents are stratified, he then constructs a database of the Jesus tradition built around clusters of similar sayings, ideas, etc. He thereby lays out a stratigraphy of the Jesus tradition. “Plural attestation in the first stratum pushes the trajectory back as far as it can go with at least formal objectivity.”78 This use of multiple attestation within the strata marks a rejection of the criterion of dissimilarity.

In the first stratum, Crossan places not only the letters of Paul, but a number of noncanonical documents (the Gospel of Thomas and the Hebrews) as well as Q, the miracles collection, and the so-called Cross Gospel.79 Not only are some of these documents noncanonical, but others are hypothetical reconstructions (Q and the Cross Gospel). This favoring of Q and now Thomas continues a line of argument seen in Borg.

While Crossan’s investment of the model has generated a great deal of debate,80 his stratigraphy and reconstructions are not based on eccentric scholarship. For example, he follows closely Kloppenborg on Q81 and Patterson on the Gospel of Thomas.82 However, those who prefer the canonical line as Sanders does strongly reject this “favoring” of hypothetical and noncanonical documents. John Meier, in his prolegomena to his study of Jesus, strongly resists the notion of the independence of the Gospel of Thomas from the canonical Gospels. For him, Thomas only makes sense in light of the gnostic myth of the second century.83 Yet using this same methodology, one could easily show that the Gospel of John is a second-century gnostic text. The question is not whether a document can be understood as gnostic. Works of Plato were found in the Nag Hammadi library. The question is whether that is the appropriate background for interpretation. Furthermore, there are formal issues to be considered. Conspicuously absent in Thomas’s version of sayings with a synoptic parallel are the clear redactional elements that would indicate borrowing.84 The imaginative power of narrative makes it difficult to understand how one could or would construct a sayings gospel by completely eliminating the narrative element. While the use of noncanonical material will remain a significant debating point, I suspect that a theological prejudice in favor of the canon is the real issue.

Crossan’s stratigraphy organizes the order in which the data are to be analyzed, but he still must argue his case. For example, Crossan rejects the cluster with the second highest score, “Jesus’ Apocalyptic Return.” In his reconstruction, it is an early postcrucifixion development that employs Daniel 7:13 as a way of understanding how the scenario of the death and resurrection will play itself out.

Under this methodology, Crossan sometimes evaluates positively what previously had been evaluated negatively. This demonstrates the openness of his method since he takes what is presented to him, not just what would build a case. His treatment of the miracle tradition is a case in point, and shows his consistency with others in the third stage. Free healing is a major building block in his reconstruction.

Crossan at times also uses the evidence of attestation and stratigraphy negatively. For example, in dealing with the apocalyptic Son of man sayings, the fact that they only have single attestation and then not from the early stages is a strong indication that they are inauthentic.85 A strong criticism of the criterion of dissimilarity, which Crossan also eschews, is that it produces an eccentric Jesus, one at odds with his culture and the tradition that followed. One could also question whether Crossan’s dual reliance on early stratigraphy and multiple attestation does not reward the atypical and useful. Or to paraphrase Walter Ong, folks in an oral culture must think memorable thoughts.86 Nevertheless, while all efforts to deal with the criteria for authenticity
have been tricky, the patterning that results from the use of stratigraphy and attestation is potentially very promising. What remains to be worked out is what goes into the various layers of the stratigraphy. For example, if one puts both Paul and Q in the first layer and privileges that layer, then the force of Sanders’s canonical line is severely questioned and relativized.

Crossan takes the long view in constructing the background against which to understand the sayings his method presents. He views Jesus and Judaism from the point of view of an anthropological and historical reconstruction of life in the Roman Empire. The three main parts of his book clearly exhibit this model. Part 1 examines the brokered empire that sets up the social environment, the Roman empire, and the anthropological model of brokerage for the distribution of power in the empire. Part 2 deals with tensions created by power in the Roman Empire and various strategies for dealing with that tension. Here the studies of Richard Horsley play a major role. In the final part, Crossan turns to Jesus’ option of a brokerless kingdom. Thus, like Borg, his model is deeply political. At the heart of the Jesus movement Crossan sees meals and healing.

The missionaries do not carry a bag because they do not beg for alms or food or clothing or anything else. They share a miracle and a Kingdom, and they receive in return a table and a house. Here, I think, is the heart of the original Jesus movement, a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources.

The most revolutionary aspect of Crossan’s Historical Jesus may be that it marks the end of traditional historical criticism as that discipline has been practiced in New Testament studies since the Enlightenment. Crossan’s work exemplifies a convergence of a number of currents in recent New Testament scholarship that challenge the status quo of historical criticism—anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism. One should distinguish Crossan’s formal methodological proposals from his material investment of the models. The formal model demands serious consideration. Scholars who disagree with his investment should supply their own to determine if it makes a substantial difference. But he also continues the tradition of Reimarus and Schweitzer in that his Jewish peasant would be more at home in the barrios and base communities of South America than in the bourgeois parishes of North American Christianity.

A Marginal Jew

John Meier has published two-thirds of his monumental study, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. A third volume has been announced. Meier is encyclopedic in that every piece of data is carefully sifted, yet his historicism is very traditional and he ignores methods he does not understand or with which he is unsympathetic. Advances in literary criticism and social studies are absent. Meier takes a close view, focusing on the data itself, never really stepping back for a middle or long view.

Meier chose the title “Marginal Jew” as a “tease-word” to suggest various ways of understanding Jesus. Jesus was a “blip on the radar screen” of the ancient world, and he marginalized himself by being “jobless” and by his teachings and practice. “Jesus’ style of preaching was thus offensive to many Jews. ... [A] poor layman from the Galilean countryside with disturbing doctrines and claims was marginal both in the sense of being dangerously antiestablishment and in the sense of lacking a power base in the capital.”

To guide his method he imagines a group of scholars, “a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, and an agnostic,” locked up in the Harvard Divinity School library who argue out the issues until they reach a consensus. The hermeneutics of historiography are highly debated today, and Meier, like Sanders, comes down on the side of positivism. His goal of objectivity is laudable, but to believe that he can represent these players is a bit naive. Furthermore, his conviction that he can so clearly distinguish between what he knows by history and faith, that he can change a historian’s hat for a theologian’s, leads to problematic conclusions, at times to an “intellectual agnosticism.” Like most third questers, Meier gives the miracle tradition a high prominence. His work on the wonder tradition defines the maximum that a critical historian can claim. He argues, “a historian must reject an apriori affirmation that miracles do not and cannot happen.”
Criteria are at the heart of Meier's historical program. He distinguishes five primary criteria. The criterion of embarrassment "focuses on actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church." The criterion of discontinuity focuses on what "cannot be derived either from Judaism at the time of Jesus or from the early Church after him." Without care this criterion leads to "a caricature by divorcing Jesus from the Judaism that influenced him and from the Church that he influenced." The criterion of multiple attestation deals with material attested in more than one independent literary source "and/or more than one literary form or genre." The criterion of coherence asserts that other sayings and deeds of Jesus that fit in well with the preliminary 'data base' established by using our first three criteria have a good chance of being historical." Finally, Meier develops the criterion of rejection and execution. This criterion pays "attention to the historical fact that Jesus met a violent end at the hands of Jewish and Roman officials and then asks us what historical words and deeds of Jesus can explain his trial and crucifixion as 'King of the Jews'."

The first four criteria are rather traditional and hardly move beyond Perrin's development or William O. Walker's, to whom Meier frequently refers positively. The final criterion is in line with Sanders and makes Jesus' end the hallmark. Meier stresses that these criteria are strongest when used in conjunction with each other. But the real problem is how they interrelate with his analogy of a group of scholars in the Harvard Divinity School library and his understanding of the separation of faith and history as ways of knowing. Meier's treatment of the virgin birth is a good example. Meier is well aware of the problems of sources in dealing with the infancy stories. But whereas some scholars would dismiss them as adding practically nothing to our knowledge of the historical Jesus, he would not. "According to the two-source theory, Matthew and Luke did not know each other's Gospels; moreover, . . . Matthew's and Luke's Infancy Narratives largely diverge from and even contradict each other. Hence, any agreements between Matthew and Luke in their Infancy Narratives become historically significant." The criterion of multiple attestation sorts out this material as historical. Meier ignores the probability of coincidence, and since for him multiple attestation is an absolute, the mere fact of multiple attestation is significant. But the

question remains, what is the significance of multiple attestation when the two witnesses are post-70 C.E.? History or nonhistory are his only explanations. Crossan's stratigraphy in combination with multiple attestation is more discriminating and powerful.

Applied to the virgin birth, again multiple attestation indicates that it is not a "late legend." Pagan myths are ruled out as not parallel enough, and so "historical-critical research simply does not have the sources and tools available to reach a final decision on the historicity of the virginal conception." The wall between history and faith means that "one's acceptance or rejection of the doctrine will be largely influenced by one's own philosophical and theological presuppositions, as well as the weight one gives Church teaching." I wonder whether anyone besides the Catholic locked in the library of the Harvard Divinity School got a vote on that one. The fundamental problem with Meier's use of his criteria is that they really do not sort the data, but reinforce a rather traditional portrait of Jesus.

Meier surveys the sources available to the historian with great thoroughness. But whereas he is quite open to the possibility of the Gospel of John containing historical material (e.g., the longer, three-year ministry), he rejects the Gospel of Thomas. If the Gospel of Thomas is gnostic, Meier's reason for rejecting it, then so is the Gospel of John and so both should be either considered or rejected. The poor agnostic must have lost a lot of votes in Meier's Harvard group.

So strongly does Meier support what I have termed Sanders's canonical line (John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul) that some 230 pages of his second volume are devoted to John the Baptist and Jesus. The "Mentor" in the second volume's subtitle is John the Baptist, "the one person who had the greatest single influence on Jesus' ministry." John was an apocalyptic prophet of an imminent end and he expected "a stronger one" to come after him. John baptized Jesus and for a time Jesus was his disciple. While shifts and differences did appear between Jesus and John, "Yet a firm substratum of the Baptist's message and life remained; and as far as we know, it remained throughout Jesus' ministry."

John the Baptist as mentor leads directly to Jesus' message. Since Jesus follows John, Jesus' message, too, is primarily apocalyptic. For Meier, Jesus preaches the kingdom of God. "His choice of it as a key theme is just that:
a conscious, personal choice, and for that reason the symbol is a privileged way of entering into Jesus’ message.” This being the case, Meier’s first task is to determine what his symbol means. He notes that the phrase “kingdom of God” is multiply attested in the Jesus tradition, but “the precise phrase ‘kingdom of God’ does not occur as such in the Hebrew Old Testament, and occurrences in the deuterocanonical/apocryphal books of the Old Testament, the Old Testament pseudopigrapha, Qumran, Philo, Josephus, and most of the targums are either rare or nonexistent.”

Meier deals with this lack of evidence by redefining the symbol as the concept of God ruling as king, for which there is abundant evidence. Thus, Meier’s confidence is high that “the kingdom of God does not have a definition; it tells a story.” He provides a “fast-forwarding” through a summary of this “mythic story” that “stretches from the first page of the Bible to its last.” Significantly, “depending upon how apocalyptic a given storyteller might be, the final kingdom might be envisioned as a restoration—but-vast improvement of David’s original kingdom, or a return to paradise on earth, or a heavenly kingdom beyond this world of time and space.”

Thus, the kingdom of God is a mythic and apocalyptic summary of Israel’s experience of God as king.

With the symbol of the kingdom of God so predetermined as apocalyptic, Meier’s first example and archetype for Jesus’ message is the Lord’s prayer, especially “your kingdom come.” Both multiple attestation and discontinuity indicate that the prayer is authentic. Its highly liturgical character does not cause Meier pause or concern.

Meier also sees that in certain sayings the kingdom is present. Luke 11:20 is his best example. This is a particularly important saying for Meier because it combines the presence of the kingdom with Jesus’ exorcisms: “But if by the finger of God I cast out demons then upon you has come the kingdom of God.” His conclusion concerning this saying is significant: “Jesus does present his exorcisms as proof that the kingdom of God that he proclaims for the future is in some sense already present.” What does “in some sense” mean? To Meier’s credit he does not try to ignore this saying, as does Sanders. “How this [the presence of the kingdom] coheres—or whether it coheres—with what Jesus says about the kingdom soon to come remains an open question.”

In a number of places Meier struggles with how to reconcile this tension. In noting the difference between John the Baptist who preached a future kingdom and Jesus, Meier states:

On the one hand, Jesus makes the kingdom of God, not himself, the direct object of his preaching. Yet what he says about the kingdom and what he promises those who enter it by accepting his message make a monumental though implicit claim: with the start of Jesus’ ministry, a definitive shift has taken place in the eschatological timetable.

In attempting to summarize this argument he concludes: “The important point, in my view, is that Jesus consciously chose to indicate that the display of miraculous power in his own ministry constituted a partial and preliminary realization of God’s kingly rule, which would soon be displayed in full force.”

In his struggle between a kingdom in the future and in the present, Meier stands alone among third stage scholars. While he leans toward Sanders in seeing the future as dominant, he does not dismiss the present kingdom.

The starting point for a question is often critical in determining the answer. Meier privileges the kingdom of God as the entrance point but then determines the meaning of the phrase from his reconstruction of the mythic story of God as king. His reconstruction compels an apocalyptic reading of the myth. Yet if he privileges kingdom of God, why does he not also privilege the parables, which were Jesus’ vehicle for the kingdom? His reasoning seems to be that parables are an inappropriate vehicle for the kingdom: “[R]ecent scholarship, by approaching the parables as autonomous pieces of rhetorical art, has reminded us how open is each parable to multiple interpretations—at least if taken by itself, in isolation from the rest of Jesus’ message and praxis.” Unless this is meant as an ad hominem argument against contemporary parable scholarship, then the force of Meier’s argument would be that Jesus made a mistake in employing parables as a vehicle for the kingdom. But perhaps parable tells us something important about the symbol of the kingdom of God.
While Meier stands alone in trying to reconcile these two elements in the kingdom, he is probably correct in rejecting the either/or distinction. The categories we are currently working with are inadequate to the discussion. We must look forward to the promised third volume, where perhaps Meier can reconcile this tension when he turns to Jesus’ own self-understanding.

The Return from Exile

If it is difficult to present a final evaluation of Meier because there is yet one more, I presume large, volume to come, the problem is even more difficult with N. T. Wright. His Jesus and the Victory of God is the second volume of a proposed five-volume series dealing with Christian origins and the question of God. Since Wright’s reconstruction is the most divergent surveyed, summarization becomes difficult. Wright’s program will appeal to traditionalists who want to maintain the historicity of the Gospels, until they reflect on what they will have to surrender.

Wright stands in opposition to Enlightenment currents, which he views as pessimistic and skeptical, and employs a methodology he terms “critical realism.” The other scholars in this review all fall within the trajectory stemming from the Enlightenment. To one degree or another, they accept the methods of historiography that have developed and evolved out of the Enlightenment. They employ a hermeneutics of suspicion. For my part, the gains of the Enlightenment in terms of scientific method are permanent, understanding that built into scientific method is a continuous correcting process of which the history of the quest is an example. I have tried to indicate at various places in this essay what I consider to be permanent gains for the quest of the historical Jesus. For example, those gains demonstrating the fictional character of the Gospel outlines (e.g., Wrede and K. L. Schmidt) and the fragmentary and oral nature of the tradition prior to the Gospels place limitations on the nature of research. Wright ultimately rejects not only the methods of the Enlightenment, but also the gains of the quest to this point. Therefore, in the end, I simply cannot take his project seriously. It is symptomatic of the loss of nerve that seems to infect parts of the West at this crucial time in history. Because I reject his project, however, does not mean that I cannot learn from it.

I will briefly describe Wright’s method and then offer an example that I hope will fairly illuminate both his method and position.

Critical realism “acknowledges the essentially ‘storied’ nature of human knowing, thinking, and living, within the larger model of worldviews and their component parts. It acknowledges that all knowledge of realities external to oneself takes place within the framework of a worldview, of which stories form an essential part.” In what potentially may yield an important insight, Wright proposes to construct the worldview of first-century Judaism. Wright distinguishes four characteristics of a worldview: “characteristic stories; fundamental symbols; habitual praxis; and a set of questions and answers” about the basic issues of life, such as, “who are we? . . . what’s wrong?” In The New Testament and the People of God, Wright constructs the worldview of first-century Judaism.

From here, Wright proceeds to discuss the subject of mindsets. A mindset is “a worldview held by a particular individual person.” Interesting people frequently have mindsets in which elements are at variance with the worldview in which they reside. In Jesus and the Victory of God, Wright reconstructs the mindset of Jesus.

The worldview of Judaism and the mindset of Jesus function as a hypothesis to explain Christian origins, or the stories early Christians told about themselves. “It [critical realism] sets up as hypotheses various stories about the world in general or bits of it in particular and tests them by seeing what sort of ‘fit’ they have with the stories already in place.” Such a hypothesis is prior to the sorting of the data and is meant to explain the data. The more data it can explain, the better the hypothesis. Thus, Wright’s critical realism turns the assumption of Enlightenment scientific method on its head. The hypothesis explains the data, rather than emerging from the data.

At the risk of oversimplification, a major element according to Wright in the worldview of first-century Judaism is the experience of exile. First-century Jews viewed themselves as exiled from and abandoned by God: “They believed that, in all the senses which mattered, Israel’s exile was still in progress.” This is the “what is wrong?” of the worldview. The Roman occupation of Israel reinforced the notion of abandonment. Even though the temple had been rebuilt, God had not
returned to dwell in it. “[U]ntil the Gentiles are put in their place and Israel, and the Temple, fully restored, the exile is not really over, and the blessings promised by the prophets are still to take place.”

Wright sees Jesus as “a prophet like the prophets of old, coming to Israel with a word from her covenant God, warning her of the imminent and fearful consequences of the direction she was traveling, urging and summoning her to a new and different way.” While Jesus expects an apocalyptic end, he, like his “contemporaries who were looking for a great event to happen in the immediate future were not expecting the end of the space-time universe,” but the end of a particular world.

Jesus’ mindset resolves the fundamental issues of the Jewish worldview. “Jesus was announcing that the long-awaited kingdom of Israel’s God was indeed coming to birth. . . . The return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion were all coming about, but not in the way Israel had supposed.” This mindset explains the Jesus tradition. The miracles of Jesus are prophetic signs “inaugurating the long-awaited time of liberations, the return from exile, the kingdom of Israel’s God.” The Son of man sayings depict not a being coming to earth from heaven, but, Wright argues, the other way around, as in Daniel, 7: “He comes from earth to heaven, vindicated after suffering.”

Wright’s analysis of Mark 13 is a good example of his method and his employment of Jesus’ mindset as a hypothesis. Despite the scholarly consensus that Mark 13 was written after the destruction of Jerusalem, Wright sees it as essentially coming from Jesus: “[W]e will discover that it possesses an inner coherence and that it draws together exactly that combination of warnings and promises which we have seen to characterize Jesus’ ministry all through.”

The disciples had gone “to Jerusalem expecting Jesus to be enthroned as the rightful king.” Now they heard the news that “the Temple’s destruction would constitute his own vindication.” Thus, Jesus was speaking about his own vindication “both as a prophet and as the one who has the right to pronounce upon the Temple, and . . . as the actual replacement for the Temple.” The followers of Jesus were to flee at the time of the destruction because they had been forewarned. “Their vindication will come when the city that has opposed Jesus is destroyed.”

While Wright sees Jesus weaving together a host of Old Testament texts in the construction of Mark 13, two in particular stand out—Daniel and 1 Maccabees. The Maccabees had used the Daniel story “in order to make it clear that the events of 167 B.C. were to be seen as the fulfillment of prophecy.” Likewise, Jesus is recycling the Danielic and Maccabean prophecies to apply to the Roman situation. These recycled prophecies “would naturally be read in the first century in terms not of Syrian invasion but of Roman.” But Jesus redefines the scenario with a difference. He identifies, according to Wright, “the forces opposing the true people of God [i.e., the disciples], not with Rome, but with present Jerusalem and its hierarchy.” Jesus speaks “as only some extreme sectarian would speak, of Jerusalem and the Temple as the real enemy, and of a little group, around a prophetic figure, as the true people of Israel. It is profoundly similar to the outlook we find in the early church.”

For Wright, the prophecies of Mark 13 are “the necessary and predictable focal point of Jesus’ whole prophetic ministry.” As such they summarize Jesus’ ministry. “As the kingdom-bearer, he had constantly been acting . . . in a way which invited the conclusion that he thought he had the right to do and be what the Temple was and did, thereby making the Temple redundant.” The kingdom of God was the liberation from exile, and Jesus was a prophet, king, messiah, and temple. The true people of Israel were Jesus’ followers, and the enemy was the hierarchy in Jerusalem, those unfaithful Jews who had rejected Jesus, and Rome’s destruction of the temple would vindicate Jesus and prove him a true prophet. “As prophet, Jesus staked his reputation on his prediction of the temple’s fall within a generation; if and when it fell, he would be vindicated.” For Wright, Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple and he was thus vindicated. Schweitzer’s charge that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet expecting the end of the space-time continuum is untrue. Likewise, the effort of some to understand Mark 13 as the Church’s expectation of Jesus’ second coming is wrong. Jesus and the early church were right and this proves it.

This is a strong hypothesis for Wright because “it includes the data.” The totalizing power of the hypothesis to explain so much, almost all, of the data is most seductive. Gone are the sometimes
tedious shifting and reconstruction in the work of Crossan and Meier. Yet the seduction should be resisted. The very profound similarity “to the outlook we find in the early church” should lead one to pause. Does apocalyptic ever produce genuine prophecy? Wright notes that Mark 13 is made up of a pastiche or interweaving of biblical texts and that his two principal texts, Daniel and Maccabees, both employ the story of past events to look back at a recent past. For example, Daniel uses the Babylonians to understand the Syrians. If the authors of Daniel and Maccabees use past events to understand the present, would it not make more sense to see Christian apocalyptic preachers using the same set of stories to make sense of Rome’s destruction of the temple? Why assume that Jesus is using these texts in a genuine prophecy (foretelling), when the history and genre of apocalyptic is to look back?

Furthermore and most importantly, the figure of the Son of man in Daniel is clearly ascending rather than descending. In 1 Thess 4:16–17, Paul uses the Son of man as descending. Finally, there is little or no evidence that first-century Judaism understood itself as in exile. These are not trivial points but major cornerstones in Wright’s reconstruction of the worldview of Judaism and the mindset of Jesus.

Jesus by Committee

Any review of the third stage must deal with the Jesus Seminar. Its founder, Robert Funk, however, does not see the work of the Seminar as part of the third stage, but as the “ReNewed Quest” for Jesus. Yet the Jesus Seminar is largely responsible for the public attention that historical Jesus scholarship has drawn in the media and for stimulating much of the debate concerning the historical Jesus. Some of that debate has been quite acrimonious. I cannot claim to be an impartial observer of the Seminar since I am a charter member and was coeditor of the Seminar’s first publication. So let the reader beware.

The Seminar also cannot really be considered in the same way as the other scholars reviewed, two of whom (Borg and Crossan) are members. The Seminar does not speak with one voice, but records votes. There is not one mind guiding the Seminar, as is the case in every other study here surveyed. The votes represent shifting alliances, minds changing, doubt. Sometimes the outcome of a vote has depended upon who showed up. Therefore, there is at times a certain inconsistency in the Seminar’s votes. The votes represent a range of positions within a group of scholars. It is not a matter of winner takes all or that the one with the most votes is right. A picture of the historical Jesus does emerge from the votes of the Seminar, but the Seminar has yet, and probably cannot, set out a single, unified portrait of Jesus.

The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 when Robert Funk sent out an invitation to scholars to join him in a renewal of the quest of the historical Jesus and to report the outcome to the general public. From the very beginning, the Seminar had an educational goal—to make the results of scholarship available to anyone who was interested. Initially, thirty scholars showed up in Berkeley, California, for the first meeting. Ultimately, about two hundred scholars were involved in the project, seventy-four of whom signed off on The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. The Seminar also began a scholarly journal, *Forum*, to report its debates and conversations.

According to The Five Gospels, the report of the Jesus Seminar, their first step “was to inventory and classify all the words attributed to Jesus in the first three centuries of the common era.” This inventory was published as *Sayings Parallels: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition* (Crossan, 1986). The procedure for the Seminar’s sessions followed a consistent pattern. Sayings were assigned, papers were written and published, then discussed and debated, and finally the scholars voted.

The original proposal had been that the voting would be a simple yes or no. Using the analogy of red-letter Bibles, those sayings that were voted yes would be printed in red. But this proposal soon proved unworkable. More options were needed to express the levels of certainty and uncertainty, and so each option was further subdivided. Red was divided into red and pink, and black into black and gray. There never was complete agreement on what the four colors signified.

In contrast to the rest of the third stage, the Jesus Seminar began with the sayings. There were several reasons for this, some of which were theoretical and others pragmatic. Funk viewed the Seminar as a renewal of the New Quest. More importantly, Rudolf Bultmann, in the
most important study of the synoptic tradition of the twentieth century, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, had divided the Gospel material into two parts: the sayings of Jesus and narrative material. This division set the agenda for the Seminar.122 The first stage ended in the publication of *The Five Gospels*, and the second in *The Acts of Jesus*. At the beginning, we had no realistic idea how long it would take to survey and vote on the material. Almost everyone estimated a much shorter time than it actually took. At the time, I was finishing a commentary on the parables,123 and so was in a position to produce an essay surveying issues of authenticity about the parables.124

The Seminar is a good example of the importance of a starting point. The parables produced a large number of red and pink votes, with the Leaven, the Good Samaritan, Dishonest Steward, and the Vineyard Laborers all receiving red votes. To scholars who have followed parable studies, there was nothing particularly surprising in the outcome. The Seminar was not concerned about the meaning or interpretation of a parable, only with its authenticity.

By beginning with the parables, two important issues came to the fore. The parables accented the wisdom tradition, and the Gospel of Thomas received independent consideration. In parable studies, this was not a controversial position, since Jeremias in the sixth German edition (1962) of his influential book on the parables had acknowledged that the parables in Thomas were independent witnesses.125 Over a period of time and debate, the dominant position in the Seminar became that not only were the parables in Thomas independent, but so was the entire Gospel of Thomas. Also, beginning with the parables led the Seminar to stress multiple attestation rather than dissimilarity. This may seem strange since so many of the parables appear just once, but the form itself is multiply attested.

Soon the apocalyptic issue was joined. It became evident that a majority of the Seminar members did not think that Jesus was an apocalyptic thinker. The reasons for this were multiple, but the two dominant ones were the parables (the point where we had started) and the recent studies on Q. John Kloppenborg, a member of the Seminar, had just produced an important study of Q arguing that it was composed of layers of which the earliest was wisdom. Apocalyptic was the latest addition to Q.126 The votes began to indicate a definite preference in the Seminar for a wisdom rather than an apocalyptic Jesus. Unfortunately, many of those who supported the apocalyptic position gradually quit attending the Seminar sessions.

The Jesus Seminar has proven to be quite controversial, probably because it went public. The Seminar should probably be viewed as an educational enterprise. Its purpose from the beginning was to make the results of scholarship readily available to the general public, something scholars seldom do. Frequently, the headlines were shocking to those who were unfamiliar with biblical scholarship, which, unfortunately, is most of the population.

The controversy in response to the Seminar has been loud and vociferous. There has been a predictable critique from the right,127 those who espouse a Kähler-like position,128 and from those who differ with the Seminar’s nonapocalyptic Jesus.129 There has also been a response within the Jesus Seminar.130 Fleshing out this debate is well beyond the scope of this survey, but I recommend that interested readers consult Mark Powell, who has in my judgment produced the fairest and most balanced analysis of the work of the Jesus Seminar and the debate that surrounds it. He concludes:

What marks the Jesus Seminar as unique—probably the only thing that marks them as unique—is that they are a group. Though other scholars may confer with colleagues, only the Jesus Seminar has invested the time, money, and energy to meet so regularly and under such circumstances that their publications can truly be termed the work of the whole group. This is not an inconsiderable accomplishment, and this fact alone earns them the attention they have received.131

**Millenarian Prophet**

The studies of Crossan, Borg, and the Jesus Seminar have provoked a spirited defense of the apocalyptic position. None of these studies move significantly beyond the position of Sanders, although each gives a new accent to the position. For that reason my treatment of them will be very brief.
In *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, Dale Allison argues that the material must be approached with hypothesis already in place, and for him the hypothesis is that Jesus was a millenarian prophet. He develops a very interesting phenomenological typology from cross-cultural analysis of the millenarianism and shows how it applies to Jesus. Allison rejects Wright’s contention that Jesus’ expectation of the end of the world was metaphorical. Allison contends that Jesus expected the end of the time-space continuum. Bart Ehrman, in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, takes a similar position. Paula Fredriksen, in *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, returns to Sanders’s original insight on the death of Jesus. That is the single fact that most needs explanation. She also advances the question of the purity code within Judaism, an issue that is very important and needs further development.

**Conclusions**

There are a number of characteristics of this third stage of the quest that hold true of all the investigators, despite their differences.

1. All are seeking a historical explanation of Jesus, and the critical issue is to explain the totality of Jesus’ activity, not just his message. This includes the death of Jesus and the subsequent rise of early Christianity. Accents vary with each author, but the effort to furnish a comprehensive model is characteristic. Vermes and Smith are more narrow in this regard with mainly univocal models, and Borg and Crossan have the richest mix. Sanders in his first volume explicitly sets out to solve the riddle of the cause of Jesus’ death; for Meier it is criterion of authenticity, and Fredriksen has returned yet again to the centrality of the crucifixion in any explanation of Jesus. Ultimately, they all argue that it was his subversive, provocative actions, not his words, that led to the confrontation with the authorities.

2. The accent falls on the miracle tradition, not the sayings. Again there are variations with Sanders and Crossan representing the richest mix and the strongest contrast. Sanders almost repudiates the sayings tradition, and, for him, the deeds interpret the sayings. Crossan’s stratification method forces him to deal with the sayings in a primary way, although his model is not that of teacher. Meier’s painstaking analysis of the wonder tradition delineates the most that a historian can claim.

Despite this shift in emphasis, the deeds fail to furnish a firm foundation. Isolating the deeds from their redactional context and providing them with a sure interpretive foundation is no easier, and perhaps harder, than dealing with the sayings tradition. Furthermore, rejecting the rich exegetical tradition built up around the parables, proverbs, and kingdom sayings impoverishes the studies. This distrust of words as evidenced by Sanders and Meier is hard to justify. Perhaps the following acid remark by Maier reflects his own impotency in a capitalist society rather than an objective assessment of words in the ancient world: “A tweedy poetaest who spent his time spinning out parables and Japanese koans, a literary aesthete who toyed with 1st century deconstructionism, or a bland Jesus who simply told people to look at the lilies of the field—such a Jesus would threaten no one, just as the university professors who create him threaten no one.”

3. Socrates, next to Jesus one of the most famous martyrs of the ancient world, died because of his provocative language, and the problems of Salman Rushdie in our own day demonstrate the power of words in a traditional society.

4. Unlike the previous two stages, which drew sharp distinctions between Jesus, Judaism, and early Christianity, the third stage accents and builds on continuity. The early work of Ben Meyer anticipated this development, and Wright is highly indebted to him. Too often, third stagers in a rush to find continuity and to be less skeptical than previous questers have been too trusting and too naive. On the other hand, the effort to make sense of Jesus within Judaism has been much more successful. Vermes’ pioneering work situating Jesus within populist Judaism rather than the elitist Judaism of rabbinic Judaism has proven a very successful interpretive strategy. The social location of Jesus is a major issue. Brad Young’s *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* fails precisely at this point when Young turns Jesus into a scribal rabbi instead of a Galilean peasant. To a lesser degree, this problem has beset the important work of Bruce Chilton.

5. The third stage has shown a rich historical mix of methods and data. While this has been controversial, for example, Smith’s use of the magic tradition or Crossan’s use of the noncanonical tradition, it is gradually producing a much richer picture of Jesus, Judaisms, and early
Christianities. The contrast between Sanders and Crossan can represent the options. For Sanders, the line between John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul is straight. For Crossan, there is a break between John and Jesus, and the Q and Thomas follow much more closely on Jesus. Thus, we have a canonical versus a pluralist line. Meier and the apocalypticists support Sanders. This marks a major debate point in the third stage, and its implications for understanding Jesus and the early Christianities cannot be overestimated. A previous generation of scholars attacked and broke down the notion of normative Judaism, arguing that there were a variety of Judaisms. Yet some have reinstated a new normative Judaism around apocalyptic expectation. This, too, should be resisted. Second temple Judaism and early Christianity were so pluralistic that we will have to decide whether one can speak of Judaism or Judaisms, and of the early Church or only of early communities.

(5) The issue of Christian faith has been a question and problem in the quest since its inauguration with Reimarus. Borg and Sanders take up very different positions on this point. Borg essentially views the quest as part of his own spiritual quest, and this is quite evident in his Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time. It begins with one of the most honest exposures by a scholar of his own spiritual quest of which I am aware. Sanders, on the other hand, confesses to his lifelong effort “to free history and exegesis from the control of theology; that is, from being obligated to come to certain conclusions which are pre-determined by theological commitment.” How does Sanders’s Jesus stand up to his religious tradition? “I am a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or that he died for the sake of its principles.”

Crossan and Meier, both Roman Catholics, represent yet another variation. Meier, somewhat in the tradition of Kähler, draws a sharp distinction between history and faith. He even at times speaks of wearing his historian’s hat and then his theologian’s hat. After Hans-Georg Gadamer one is tempted to ignore this simplistic and naïve distinction, but Meier apparently is serious. History and faith are separate and do not commingle for Meier. Crossan, on the other hand takes a much more analogical approach. He argues, “What happened historically is that those who believed in Jesus before his execution continued to do so afterward.” Thus, Crossan posits no sharp wedge, and both history and faith are free to interact. His Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography could be understood as historical understanding seeking faith, to play on Anselm’s aphorism. Wright represents yet another position in which there is no distinction between history and faith.

(6) A schism within the third stage breaks around what I have termed the canonical versus the pluralist lines. Those in the canonical camp tend to disparage the sayings at the expense of the deeds, paint Jesus’ eschatology as apocalyptic, see him as apolitical, and finally take a middle view that focuses on Jesus within Judaism. This clearly describes Sanders, Wright, and Meier. In Meier’s view, “Jesus seems to have had no interest in the great political and social questions of his day. He was not interested in the reform of the world because he was prophesying its end.” On the other hand, Borg and Crossan, beginning with a long view, portray Jesus in the sapiential mode, thus balancing the deeds and sayings, and present a political Jesus who was concerned with issues of the day. They see both Jesus and Judaism within the context of the Roman Empire.

Another aspect of this schism is the status of Q and the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars who specialize in the Gospel of Thomas have reached a consensus that Thomas is not gnostic, is not dependent on the synoptics, and that the core of the tradition goes back to the first century. Q studies are more problematic. The international Q project appears to be forging a consensus, but there are significant objections. Clearly Q cannot be set aside and does represent a wisdom position in early Christianity. So we have to deal with a pluralistic primitive Christianity. When should we refer to the Jesus movement as a movement, and when should we call it Christian? Until these basic questions can be solved, stratigraphy will be problematic. Despite the deep schism that divides the third stage, the mix is rich enough to develop into a real debate.

(7) Each stage of the quest has sought a firm foundation on which to build. The first sought a solution to the synoptic problem in hopes
that it would produce a basis for a biography of Jesus. The New Quest investigated criteria for authenticity in an effort to certify the sayings tradition. The problem of foundation has plagued the third stage. Sanders selected the temple act as the firm foundation, and Crossan constructed a formal method that intersected stratigraphy with multiple attestation. Meier has carefully sorted all the data, and Wright has created an all-encompassing hypothesis. Others have sought the appropriate background, charismatic Hasid or magician, millenarian prophet or wisdom teacher. The foundation has proven elusive because one cannot dispense with the need for interpretation, and interpretation inevitably introduces doubt, argument, and subjectivity. The historical sciences can never achieve the certainty of the experimental sciences. And so the sure foundation will remain a problem, even if gains are made.

Where to begin is the problem. Does one start with the data (Sanders, Crossan, Meier) or a hypothesis (Borg, Wright, Allison)? I find the latter very problematic because there is no way to certify the hypothesis. This leads to totalizing theories. The question is not whether something can be interpreted by a given hypothesis, but should it? On the other hand, those who begin with the data always face the issue of which data to use. I find more persuasive Crossan's formal method than I do Meier’s criteria or Sanders’ certain facts. A continued refinement of Crossan’s formal method and its investment strikes me as the direction to proceed.

While I obviously favor beginning with the data rather than a hypothesis, this is not a simple either/or process. Rather, it is a dialectic between data and hypothesis, with the hypothesis constantly being checked against the data. Simple hypotheses and univocal models should be avoided. Many of our models come from upper-class, literate culture, and thus are inappropriate for Jesus.

Meier’s privileging of the symbol of the kingdom of God is an important step forward. But, how do we know what kingdom of God means? Meier turns to the concept of God as king. But I would suggest that we follow Jesus’ own guide and turn to the parables. To use Wright’s phrase, the parables are Jesus’ mindset. The parables as Jesus’ mindset provide the framework to understand the deeds and sayings isolated by formal method.

There have always been efforts to silence the quest of the historical Jesus. Yet it will not go away. For as Schweitzer remarked, the quest “laid down the conditions and determined the course of religious thinking of the future.” The prophecy may yet come true.

NOTES


30. Vermes, Jesus the Jew, 22.
32. Vermes, Jesus the Jew, 65.
34. Vermes, Religion of Jesus the Jew, 5.
37. Smith, Jesus the Magician, 16.
42. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 18, 22.
43. Ibid., 4–5.
44. Ibid., 8, 11–12. See also E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin Press, 1993), 94–95.
45. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 61, 63, 70–71.
46. Ibid., 71.
47. Ibid., 77, 87, 97.


56. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 264.

57. Ibid., 11.

58. Sanders, Historical Figure of Jesus, 94–95. The emphasis is Sanders’s.

59. See also Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 93: “It seems to be shared by the entirety of the early Christian movement.”


61. Sanders, Historical Figure of Jesus, 64.


63. Ibid., 32, 43.

64. Ibid., 41.


71. Sanders, Historical Figure of Jesus, 180.

72. See Perrin, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus; Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom.


75. Crossan, Historical Jesus, xxviii–xxix.


77. Crossan, Historical Jesus, 427–34.

78. Crossan, Historical Jesus, xxxiii.


82. Steven Patterson, The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1993).


85. Crossan, Historical Jesus, 243.


93. Meier, Marginal Jew, 1:11.
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131. Mark Allen Powell, Jesus as a Figure in History (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 81.


133. Meier, Marginal Jew, 1:177.


139. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 333–34.

140. Meier, Marginal Jew, 1:197.


142. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 190.


