

# A Survey of Historical Jesus Studies: From Reimarus to Wright

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## Introduction

The study of the life, ministry, and person of Jesus Christ has been at the center of the Church's thinking since its inception, but the last two hundred years have seen a marked change in how those within the Church and those without have examined Jesus and the Church's conceptions about him. The Enlightenment brought sweeping change to the world, and religious studies were no exception. Everything, even Jesus himself, fell prey to critical method and examination, and the current state of Jesus studies and Christology can be traced back to this fundamental change in the world's way of thinking. The period of time covered in this study dates from the Enlightenment to the present day, with two respective scholars being used as bookends.<sup>1</sup> Of course nothing is as simple as it seems. Hermann Samuel Reimarus did not think in a vacuum; recent study has pointed to trends and periods earlier than the Enlightenment which influenced his thinking.<sup>2</sup> He was the first to give voice, however, to anything substantially different from the tradition and teaching received in the church throughout the seventeen and a half centuries before his writings were published, so he is seen as the starting point for modern critical study of Jesus. Using Reimarus as a starting point is now generally accepted as heuristically viable and useful. N. T. Wright is the ending point because he more than many other scholars is doing things in a positive way. He has a respect for history, a thirst for theology, and a sound method. So between these two men comes a period which is important to understand for those who wish to study Jesus and proclaim him in the next century.

Two caveats are in order before beginning. First, this study seeks to give an overview, not detailed analysis. I will show major trends evident in this period, I will identify major players, and I will offer tentative evaluations for the future direction of Jesus studies. It is a definitely a bird's eye view. Second, terms must be defined. Technically "Historical Jesus studies" and "Christology" are not identical areas of study even though they focus upon the same person. Studies of the historical Jesus seek to explain and disseminate a reconstruction of his human life and work which is critically accurate and defensible; it is the practice of history. Christology, on the other hand, generally studies the meaning and significance of his death and divine life, both pre-existence and resurrection life, as they are expounded by the Church beyond Historical categories to spiritual and religious meaning and truth; it is the practice of theology. The quandary which this period leaves us and which anyone who serious delves into this area must address is the current divorce in religious studies between the historical Jesus and the Christological Jesus, between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Historical Jesus studies and Christology should go hand in hand; it is only in an attempt to be focused and concise that I have only looked at one side of the equation.

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<sup>1</sup> The time which this paper covers was suggested to me by Dr. Daniel Wallace, Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is also to be credited with using Reimarus and Wright as beginning and ending points for the paper in imitation of Schweitzer's *magnum opus*.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 13-6, points out the inability of Reformation theology to adequately deal with the life of Jesus as a primary factor for setting the stage for Reimarus. Harvey K. McArthur, *The Quest Through the Centuries: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 104, points to the influence of English Deists upon Reimarus with whom he had had contact during a visit to England.

## Overview of Historical Jesus Studies: Reimarus to Wright

The history of Historical Jesus studies during this period has generally been divided into recognizable periods. Although there is danger in defining anything into rigid periods of time, these classifications have proven themselves useful in tracking the major trends of study and patterns of thought in Jesus studies in the last two hundred years. Despite slight differences in naming, these distinct periods are generally recognized and used in almost every work concerning this time. My method will be to explain general trends and direction for each period of time as well as major players who helped to define that period. The major periods are the Old Quest, from 1778 to 1906; an interim period or “No Quest,”<sup>3</sup> from 1906 to 1953; the New Quest, from 1953 to the present day; and the Third Quest, from the early 1980’s until the present day.

### *The Old Quest (1778-1906)*

The first Quest for the historical Jesus, now defined generally as the Old Quest, received its name from the title given to the English translation of Albert Schweitzer’s book, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, published in 1906.<sup>4</sup> The English translation was given the title *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* which came to be used for the pattern of study as a whole.<sup>5</sup> There perhaps is one basic, broad attitude which operated during this period: a true, critical understanding of the history of Jesus’ life leads one away from the faith that had been received by the contemporary church.<sup>6</sup> This time was the time of the Enlightenment. Dogma and revelation no longer were accepted as accurate sources of information. Critical history, devoted to sources and “objectivity,” held primacy of place in the determination of truth. Scholars working during this time felt that only critical historical work could truly discover who Jesus was. They believed it could strip away inaccurate layers of interpretation placed upon him by later followers which were not historical in any sense. This method of investigation had been used in other fields, and it was now time to apply it to the Bible. The application of this method of history upon the Gospel materials and their central character yielded something far different than what was normally understood to be true. The essential conclusion was that the Jesus of history was in no way equal to or coextensive with the Christ of faith. In fact, the Jesus of history had been transformed into the Christ of faith by naïve people at best, deceivers at worst. Along with this recovery of the true Jesus of history, the Old Quest carried with it the implicit assumption that the theology of the church should change to correct itself in light of this new historical revelation.<sup>7</sup> The belief in Christ passed down throughout the ages in the church had been built on an improper historical understanding. In light of that, the belief should now change.

The starting point for this historical quest was Hermann Samuel Reimarus. Born in 1694, he was a professor of Oriental languages in Hamburg until his death in 1768. Interestingly enough, he never made his views about Christianity publicly known during his lifetime. It was not until Reimarus’ works were published posthumously by Gotthold Ephraïm Lessing in fragments from 1774 to 1778 that his private views were made public. The most important fragment was the seventh one, published in 1778, entitled “Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger,” variously translated as “On the Intention of Jesus and His

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<sup>3</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1906).

<sup>5</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: A. and C. Black, 1910).

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 17. Wright attributes this tendency to Reimarus specifically, but I see it as representative of the period as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library, ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 819.

Disciples”<sup>8</sup> or “The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples.”<sup>9</sup> This truly was the fragment which started the quest for the historical Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

In “Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger” Reimarus postulated an intense difference between who Jesus actually was and what his disciples proclaimed him to be. Wright’s assessment of Reimarus is useful as a summary:

Jesus was a Jewish reformer who became increasingly fanatical and politicized; and he failed. His cry of dereliction on the cross signalled the end of his expectation that his god would act to support him. The disciples fell back on a different model of Messiahship, announced that he had been ‘raised’, and waited for their god to bring the end of the world. They too were disappointed, but instead of crying out in despair they founded the early Catholic church, which to Reimarus may have looked like much the same thing.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus was a revolutionary who tried and failed; the disciples were deceivers who propagated a view of Jesus they knew to be false. Reimarus in his mind had unearthed a historical Jesus antithetical to the Christ of faith, and he hoped it would be the demise of Christianity as he knew it.<sup>12</sup>

Once begun, the quest of the historical Jesus continued in earnest. David Friedrich Strauss is perhaps the best known scholar from this period. Born in 1808, he held various teaching posts in his early life. He was called to Zürich as a Professor of Theology in 1839, but because of opposition to him by conservative Christians he was never allowed to take up his post. He lived as a freelance writer after that until his death in 1874.<sup>13</sup> Strauss wrote his monumental work *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*<sup>14</sup> when he was 28 years old. In this work he patently rejected supernaturalism and rationalism and described the church’s handling of the historical information about Christ as myth. Strauss accepted a bare historical framework of Jesus’ life—including events such as his baptism by John the Baptist, his teaching and making of disciples, as well as his death due to the hostility of the Pharisees—but the early church elaborated upon this and turned the historical Jesus into something he was not by a twofold process. First, the church interpreted the events of Jesus’ life as fulfillment of prophecy and Old Testament belief and expectation, thus establishing him as Messiah. Second, in accordance with his reputation as Messiah, the church created myths and legends about him through the vehicle of community belief. “The historical Jesus was thus turned into the divine Messiah by the pious, but erroneous devotion of the church.”<sup>15</sup> Thus according to Strauss the historical Jesus was buried underneath deep layers of myth, so much so that a biography of his life was nearly impossible to write.

Following Strauss was a true giant of the Christian faith and scholarly insight who marks both the end of the Old Quest and a new direction for Historical Jesus studies. Albert Schweitzer was truly a genius in his own right. He published his *magnum opus*, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-*

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<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Talbert, ed., *Fragments* (trans. Ralph S. Fraser; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples* (trans. George Wesley Buchanan; Leiden: Brill, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Tatum, 68. Colin Brown, “Quest of Historical Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 326

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 16-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 492.

<sup>14</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835-1836).

<sup>15</sup> Brown, “Quest,” 328.

*Forschung*, in 1906 at the age of 31. Not only did he prove himself to be an influential biblical scholar, he also distinguished himself in the field of music and medicine. It is well known that the last fifty years of his life were spent as a missionary doctor in Africa.<sup>16</sup> His work contributed to the study of the historical Jesus in two ways. First, he declared the original quest to be void of results. In his estimation, the liberal lives of the nineteenth century were simply reflections of those who sought the historical Jesus. Second, he took issue with them for minimizing or neglecting the eschatological dimension of Jesus' words and actions in an attempt to make him more universal. Schweitzer felt that the key to understanding Jesus was his eschatology. Jesus could not be divorced from the eschatological context which he shared with the Judaism of his day and be understood in any reasonable fashion. The problem with Schweitzer's view is the extreme form of apocalypticism which he believed Jesus held. Wright's assessment is useful at this point:

He [i.e., Jesus] believed himself to be the Messiah while the onlookers thought he might be Elijah; he confidently expected that his god would step in and bring the world to an end during the course of his ministry. He dreamed the impossible dream of the kingdom, bringing about the end of world history. When this did not happen, and the great wheel of history refused to turn, he threw himself upon it, was crushed in the process, but succeeded in turning it none the less. He thus took upon himself the Great Affliction which was to break upon Israel and the world. The bridge between his historical life and Christianity is formed by his personality: he towers over history, and calls people to follow him in changing the world. The very failure of his hopes set them free from Jewish shackles, to become, in their new guise, the hope of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Schweitzer thus halted the Old Quest so severely that it would not continue for another 50 years, yet he also set the stage for the Third Quest which would not start until 75 years after his writing and fifteen years after his death in 1965.

### ***An Interim Period (1906-1953)***

The period immediately following the publication of Schweitzer's decisive work was a hiatus from the study of the historical Jesus. It has even been called the period of "No Quest."<sup>18</sup> Schweitzer had so effectively critiqued the Old Quest concerning its universalizing tendencies and lack of apocalyptic vision that scholarly pursuit into the historical Jesus was halted. Historical skepticism was the major feature of this period and its epitome is found in Rudolf Bultmann. A description of him and his views is sufficient for understanding this period.

Bultmann lived from 1884 until 1976. Throughout his life he held various teaching positions at different schools in Germany. He is most famous for his contributions to form criticism detailed in his work *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*.<sup>19</sup> Bultmann contributed to this interim period between the quests by focusing the attention of history upon the early church, not the life of Jesus. The material in the Gospels does not illuminate the life of Jesus but the *Sitz im Leben* of the church. Jesus' words were in fact those of Christian preachers speaking in his name, and the Christ which was preached was the Christ of faith, not the Jesus of history. Because of these characteristics of the New Testament documents, little could be said about the life of Jesus; material to gather that information simply did not exist in the New Testament. Despite this historical problem, Bultmann saw no need for the theology of the church to change in the slightest due to any historical study or knowledge. The theology of the church was in place because of a response to Jesus, not because of historical verity, and could stand as it was with no challenge to change

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<sup>16</sup> Kümmel, 490.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Tatum, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2d ed. (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, vol. 29; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931). Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper, 1963).

from historical judgments. Jesus places an existential call to decision upon the lives of all whom he touches, and indeed the historical disjunction between his life and faith makes this existentialism all the stronger in Bultmann's thought.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The New Quest (1953 to the present)***

The force of Bultmann's thinking and theology was difficult to overcome, but not impossible. The next stage of serious investigation of the historical Jesus softened the skepticism of Bultmann somewhat, but it did not alter at any fundamental level the wide reaching disdain for the historical record contained in the New Testament materials. This renewal of the Old Quest shares many characteristics of its predecessor and carries many of its assertions much further.

The New Quest began on October 23, 1953 when Ernst Käsemann presented his lecture on "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" to a reunion of Bultmann's students. The ideals and methods adopted by the New Quest did differ somewhat from Bultmann's thought. Käsemann criticized Bultmann's total disconnection of history and faith, emphasizing that Jesus must be rooted in history to some degree to avoid docetism which would allow Christ to be formed however the scholar wills.<sup>21</sup> This was a valid criticism which the New Quest was right to take up. However, the New Quest remained in the same vein as its predecessors in many ways. As Bultmann did, those within the New Quest relied heavily upon the sayings of Jesus as primary material, generally ignoring the events surrounding his life as worthy material for discerning the historical Jesus.<sup>22</sup> The New Quest makes full use of critical tools such as source and form criticism which Wright asserts "have caused considerable difficulty when it comes to serious historical reconstruction."<sup>23</sup> The New Quest generally holds to an extreme view of apocalyptic and rejects it in contrast to Schweitzer who accepted it. The New Quest generally views scripture in a manner similar to Wilhelm Wrede's in that the majority of the framework and content can be traced to the early church and is useless in establishing any type of historical truth.<sup>24</sup>

The best known permutation of the New Quest is the Jesus Seminar. Headed by Robert Funk, the Jesus Seminar purports to undertake a serious, scholarly analysis of the material in the New Testament with the goal of determining who Jesus really was and freeing the Church from the improper interpretation handed down through the centuries.<sup>25</sup> Serious analysis of the Jesus Seminar has been undertaken by many

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, "Quest," 334.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelium: zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Library of Theological Translations, trans. J. C. G. Greig; Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1971). During the time before Wrede wrote, the majority of scholars held that Mark was the first gospel to be written and that the author did preserve historical information. Wrede attacked this by asserting that all of Mark was written within the theological framework of the Messianic Secret; the author concocted the Messianic secret to explain how Jesus was recognized as the Messiah only after his death, not during his life. Thus Wrede removed the last support modern scholarship had for asserting that the New Testament contained any historically accurate writings.

<sup>25</sup> The best know writings of the seminar are Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), and Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

scholars,<sup>26</sup> so only two major points need to be stated here. One, the Jesus Seminar falls right in line behind both Bultmann's and Wrede's skepticism. One need not read very far into the writings of the Seminar to find statements arguing against the historicity of the New Testament documents. This general attitude has shifted the burden of proof to those who claim historicity. This skepticism is obvious in their results: the Seminar does not rate many sayings or deeds at all as being exactly what Jesus said or did, so they are left with very little information upon which to base their historical reconstruction. Second, it can be charged that the Seminar is simply working to prove forgone conclusions about who Jesus really was. In the Introduction to *The Five Gospels*, the authors present many "Rules" which on the surface are intended to be understood as objective facts which guide their investigation.<sup>27</sup> Many of these "Rules," however, are far from settled in modern scholarship and simply represent the bias of the Seminar. As a matter of comparison, one such rule concerns Jesus' teaching: "Jesus' images are concrete and vivid, his sayings and parables customarily metaphorical and without explicit application."<sup>28</sup> Few would argue the accuracy of this statement. However, on the very same page is another statement of very doubtful worth: "Jesus makes no claim to be the Anointed, the messiah."<sup>29</sup> To make this claim as a "Rule" intended to guide the investigation is an *a priori* assumption which can only be seen as a conclusion reached before the investigation even starts. A cursory investigation of recent scholarship on Jesus' statements and view of himself will show that this question is in no way settled, and there is no scholarly consensus. Assuming their conclusions is a serious flaw in the Seminar's investigation, and it casts doubt upon the value of their work. Given these brief assessments, it is not difficult to see how the Seminar arrived at their conclusions: Jesus was a wise man, a sage who was distinct but not in any miraculous, apocalyptic, Christological way.

### ***The Third Quest (Early 1980's to the Present Day)***

The Third Quest is distinguished from the other quests not so much in time as in thought and method. This stage is not as easily defined because it does not have a definite starting point, and scholars which fall under this rubric often diverge widely on other matters. Despite this diversity there are certain trends which can be identified. In one vein, the scholars within the Third Quest attempt to do history seriously by placing Jesus squarely and credibly within his Jewish eschatological context. This quest rejects the historical skepticism of the New Quest and embraces Schweitzer's central theme to Jesus' life while at the same time refining it and making it more accurate and representative of the Judaism of Jesus' day.<sup>30</sup> In another vein, parallel to historical work centering upon eschatology is a new field of study usually called early Christology. Early Christology casts its net wider than Historical Jesus studies because it also looks at the theological development which takes place within the New Testament writings as well. It is similar, though, in that it seeks to trace the roots of Christian conception about the Christ of faith through the New Testament writings as far back as historically possible, even into the life and understanding of Jesus himself.<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps simplistic to state it this way, but the Third Quest contains two broad trends, one which does history which is theologically accurate, and another which does theology which is historically accurate. There is much overlap, but there is much complementary work as well.

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<sup>26</sup> E.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), and Richard B. Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," *First Things* 43 (May 1994), 43-48.

<sup>27</sup> "The Jesus Seminar formulated and adopted 'rules of evidence' to guide its assessment of gospel traditions" (emphasis added). Funk et al., *The Five Gospels*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 83-9.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), ix.

N. T. Wright is a major player within the Third Quest worthy of note. He is currently Dean of Lichfield Cathedral in Staffordshire, England and has plans to return to academic life soon.<sup>32</sup> He has written many popular works, and his major contribution to scholarly writing is a multi-volumed work currently in progress entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Two volumes have already been published, *The New Testament and the People of God*<sup>33</sup> and *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Wright is making a positive contribution in Jesus studies because he has clearly thought through the historical questions which must be answered in order to get an accurate picture of who Jesus was and what he did. In his view, the scholar's main goal should be to determine how history progressed "from the pluriform Judaism that existed within the Greco-Roman world of 10 BC to the pluriform Judaism and Christianity of AD 110."<sup>34</sup> To do so, Wright proposes five questions which must be answered: One, how does Jesus fit into the Judaism of his day? Two, what were his aims? Three, why did he die? Four, how did the early church come into being, and why did it take the shape it did? Five, why are the gospels what they are? Wright should be allowed to speak for himself in summarizing his views. The context of this excerpt is the validity of Jesus' resurrection:

The relevance of Jesus, then, becomes radically different depending on whether one accepts or rejects the witness of the early church to his resurrection. Furthermore, even if one does accept that witness, it means radically different things depending on one's view of Jesus prior to the resurrection. If he was a docetic figure, the divine being of so much would-be orthodox theology, his resurrection would simply validate the salvation he had revealed and offered. It would prove that he was, after all, 'god' . . . . If he was a teacher of timeless truths, the announcer of the timeless call to decision, or the pioneer of a new way of being-in-the-world, his resurrection would presumably endorse the programme he had articulated; though, interestingly, those who have constructed Jesus-figures like that tend not to include the resurrection in their schemes, except as a metaphor for the rise of Christian faith. But if he was an eschatological prophet/Messiah, announcing the kingdom and dying in order to bring it about, the resurrection would declare that he had in principle succeeded in his task, and that his earlier redefinitions of the coming kingdom had pointed to a further task awaiting his followers, that of *implementing* what he had achieved. Jesus, after all, as a good first-century Jew, believed that Israel functioned to the rest of the world as a hinge to the door; what he had done for Israel, he had done in principle for the whole world. It makes sense, within his aims as we have studied them, to suppose that he envisaged his followers becoming in their turn Isaianic heralds, lights to the world.<sup>35</sup>

## Major Areas of Need at this Juncture

After surveying the landscape, it is perfectly reasonable to chart our direction. Where are Jesus studies to go? What are the key ideas and thoughts to refute, ponder, or accept? Here I offer three areas of need and two cautions.

### Needs

Much modern critical study of the historical Jesus uses extra-canonical works for historical information. For example, the Jesus Seminar believes the Gospel of Thomas to be an independent source

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<sup>32</sup> Tim Stafford, "N. T. Wright: Making Scholarship a Tool for the Church," *Christianity Today* 43, no. 2 (8 February 1999), 42.

<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 659-60.

for information about Jesus,<sup>36</sup> and they date it older even than Mark.<sup>37</sup> It becomes a crucial linchpin in their historical reconstruction and perhaps sets the standard by which other works, even the canonical ones, are judged. But is their assessment correct? Evangelical scholarship must seriously address the dating of extra-canonical books like the Gospel of Thomas and their relationship to the canonical materials. Just as J. B. Lightfoot accurately dated the seven Ignatian letters as within the early period of Christianity and Constantin von Tischendorf found early textual evidence for the text of the New Testament and thus F. C. Baur's Hegelian reconstruction of the formation of Christianity fell, perhaps scholars need to take time to work on these materials to date them in relationship to the canonical materials and assess their textual origins; the results might prove to be just as dramatic.

The primary historical method in use since the 1950's has utilized the criteria of authenticity. These are various rules used to determine whether or not something is more or less likely to be historical. They include the criterion of dissimilarity, coherence, multiple attestation, and embarrassment. The issue concerns the use of these criteria in light of the historical work proposed by the Third Quest. For example, the criterion of dissimilarity states that traditions different from the Judaism of Jesus' day and the Christian church he founded are more likely to be original. This is in direct conflict with the trend to see Jesus as firmly within the Judaism of his day and directly connected to the church he founded. Criteria of authenticity must be constantly evaluated and reevaluated, refined and revised. We must learn how these criteria are affected by true historical work. This does not mean that we should reject them out of hand. Instead scholars should make them more useful as a better historical method is developed.

The alarming trend in a survey of historical Jesus studies in this period is the demands placed upon the church to change in light of the historical reconstructions advanced. This was a definite agenda of the Old Quest and still is of the New. But these demands assume that the historical Jesus found is the definitive portrait of Jesus above all others. But is the historical Jesus equivalent to Jesus in his fullness? We must carefully answer no. This gap between the historical Jesus and the real Jesus<sup>38</sup> requires that we do two things. First, as scholars who are using history as our primary tool we must understand history's limitations and restrictions. Christianity is based upon history but understanding it never has been and never will be solely a historical endeavor. We need to properly assess and if need be reassess history's place in the study of Jesus. Second, we must learn how to properly place the historical Jesus within Christian life, thought, and theology as a whole. The historical Jesus as a modern reconstruction should not displace centuries of Christian thought and practice. Is it a useful endeavor? Yes, by all means; anything which delves into the person and work of Christ is worth pursuing, but it should be pursued with the proper method and perspective.

## Cautions

The cautions I would offer are interrelated. The study of Jesus in any form or fashion demands humility. We are finite creatures, separated from his life on earth by great geographical, chronological, and cultural distance. We do not have exhaustive knowledge about Jesus. We also come upon the scene at the tail end of two thousand years of study, reflection, and investigation into Jesus. The greatest minds in the history of the world have sought him, and we follow in their path. As scholars who usually strive for

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<sup>36</sup> Funk et al., *The Five Gospels*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 18. Although the text does not date these works specifically, the chart on p. 18 shows general relationships. The Gospel of Thomas is shown to be totally independent from the canonical Gospels, and it is placed on or around 50 C.E. The Gospel of Mark is also shown to be an independent source, but it is placed on or around 70 C.E. This chart reiterates the important place the Jesus Seminar grants to the Gospel of Thomas.

<sup>38</sup> By this I do not mean to imply that a portrait of the historical Jesus is inaccurate. I believe that Historical Jesus studies can be very fruitful in describing who Jesus was in his context and what were his ministry and mission. It is perhaps better to say that the historical Jesus is a "subset" of the real Jesus in his fullness, although even this metaphor does not adequately describe the relationship between the two concepts.

honesty and integrity in our work, we should also strive for humility. Unfortunately this is sorely lacking in many scholars who study Historical Jesus and Christology. They presume to wipe away the Christ of faith with modern critical methods, a few articles, and some well-placed press conferences. The hubris of such scholarship is staggering. Let us not duplicate the errors of those currently in the fray. We should not be afraid to ask the hard questions and challenge currently held assumptions, but we must always be humble in our investigations and assertions and never assume that we have painted the definitive portrait of Jesus.

Not only must we embody humility, we must also embody the proper kind of skepticism. The trend in Jesus studies has been skepticism about the historical integrity of the text which we have. We must instead be skeptical about our own objectivity. Two hundred years of investigation into the historical Jesus have produced a bewildering array of differing pictures. Many were made in the image of the investigator, and many responded to the cultural questions of the time. The passage of time has shown us that those who investigate the historical Jesus have not been objective but have responded to and answered many of their own questions. We are not free from this trap either. We should carefully investigate our own biases and examine our results to weed out improper conclusions.

## Conclusion

The tendency in evangelical scholarship has been to limit or even eliminate the pursuit of the historical Jesus from our scholarly work. I grew up hearing many sermons against “liberal theologians” who were attacking Christ, and that attitude is pervasive. Unfortunately, we have not balanced that with positive contributions in these areas; instead we have abandoned the playing field. As evangelicals who love the Lord we should strive to work positively in this area. Of course we will not accept every method or assumption, but we can make a positive contribution and change the tide. In a recent article in *Christianity Today*, Wright relates an incident which changed his attitude towards scholarly study and impacted the direction his life was to take. John Wenham was addressing the Christian Union at Oxford, and Wright says:

In one of those seminars, he said of course you realize what we desperately need are people who love the Lord and love scripture, and have got the academic background to do the biblical research. He said it's no good waiting for people who don't have that love in their hearts to write silly things about the Bible, and then put Christian scholars to work refuting them. What we need are people out there making contributions and feeding the stuff into the stream higher up.<sup>39</sup>

In closing, as Wenham suggested to Wright, let us commit to being proactive in our study of Jesus. Let us not be afraid to blaze new trails and know Jesus in new and different ways. Our pursuits are not our own; let us do them for him and God's greater glory.

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<sup>39</sup> Stafford, “Wright,” 43.