

Can the New Jesus Save Us?

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Bob Dylan told us that you don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. These days you don't have to be a biblical scholar to know that the historical Jesus enterprise is prospering. Cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*, articles in local newspapers, and a flood of hot-selling books tell us "He's b-a-a-a-ack." Not Freddie Krueger and not the Jesus worshipped and adored by the church, but the scholars' Jesus, the Jesus who is reconstructed by New Testament experts and ancient historians. These scholars claim their Jesus is the historical Jesus, the real Jesus, to be distinguished from the Jesus of myth or dogma who is the product of the church.

This is the third such "quest for the historical Jesus" in the span of roughly 150 years. The nineteenth century gave us the original quest, a project widely believed today to tell us more about the questers than about the actual Jesus. This original quest was finished off at the turn of the century by Albert Schweitzer's devastating *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which argued that the actual Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher who was utterly different from the ethical teacher beloved by liberal theology.

For several decades, the project of reconstructing the "historical Jesus" lay dormant as a result of a strange alliance of liberals and some conservatives, who agreed on the necessity for a distinction between "the Christ of faith" and the "Jesus of history." These conservatives thought it was the church's task to proclaim the former; the work of Bultmann had shown liberals that the latter was beyond recovery.

However, it is hardly surprising that work on the historical Jesus eventually resumed as the "new quest" among Bultmann's former students and others. After all, the Christ of faith the church proclaims was a historical figure who "suffered under Pontius Pilate." And skepticism about the possibility of knowing the historical Jesus could hardly endure among scholars trained to investigate such things; otherwise, what would such people do?

As far as I can tell, this second quest for the historical Jesus — unlike the first quest — came to no dramatic conclusion. Rather, like so many academic debates, it just petered out, suffering from the law of diminishing returns. Once more the ugly face of skepticism and potential unemployment loomed, since one only needs a certain number of scholars to point out that knowledge of a particular kind cannot be had.

At some point, a third quest for the historical Jesus was inevitable. What is surprising about the newest quest is partly the sheer number of publications it has generated; a project that not many years ago seemed moribund is suddenly pulsing with life. Even more surprising is the *public* character of the new enterprise. The pilgrims on this new journey are not solitary travelers, nor are they content to form modest little groups who recite tales to one another. Rather, they seem determined to drag a large section of the population with them.

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar clearly has played a central role in taking this display of scholarly energy into the public arena. In 1985, a group of around 30 scholars formed this group "to renew the quest of the historical Jesus and to report the results of its research to more than a handful of biblical scholars." The last clause seems a masterpiece of understatement. Now numbering around 200 members, the Jesus Seminar has been spectacularly successful in hitting the front page of newspapers and the covers of magazines with its unorthodox conclusions — not to mention the provocatively titled best-seller *The Five Gospels*, where the seminar's methods and results are presented in detail.

Leaving aside for a moment the question of content, how did the seminar arrive at its picture of Jesus? In true democratic fashion, the members of the seminar *voted*, determining the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus by dropping colored beads in a box. (Though the seminar is now working on events in Jesus' life, the original work dealt only with the alleged sayings of Jesus.) Different colors of beads represented various grades of authenticity, ranging from red ("Jesus said this or something very like it") to black ("This saying was created by later tradition").

Such a procedure was bound to generate media coverage, and this result seems to have been foreseen and intended by the seminar. However, the more fundamental question concerns the basis for voting. How did the members of the seminar determine the authenticity of various sayings?

A quick answer seems to be "skeptically." Only about 18 percent of the sayings traditionally attributed to Jesus were accepted by the seminar as authentic. The seminar came down on the skeptical end of the teeter-totter because its members adopted the judicial assumption of "guilty until proven innocent." (The scholars assumed the Gospels "to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements that express the church's faith in him, and by plausible fictions that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century listeners who knew about divine men and miracle workers firsthand." This procedure partly reflects a widespread — though, in my view, mistaken — idea that such a skeptical view of sources is a necessary characteristic of a tough-minded, critical historian. However, it also reflects a suspicious view of the communities that created the writings we know as the New Testament.)

These communities, as well as the writers of the four canonical Gospels, are seen as having no qualms about attributing common lore to Jesus or even about putting their own words into the lips of Jesus. Seminar leaders contend that even when authentic historical materials are present, they are often "Christianized" to such a degree that they require wholesale recasting in order to restore them to their "original" form.

It seems likely that the seminar put a fair amount of weight on what is called the "criterion of dissimilarity," though it is hard to know this without the ability to read the minds of "voters". Since the policy was to accept as authentic only what can be proven to stem from Jesus, sayings of Jesus that *could* have been created by the early church or that *could* be general rabbinic teachings of the time must first be rejected. The idea is that we can only be sure of those sayings of Jesus that would fit with neither the early church nor first-century Judaism. (By the same reasoning, future historians would judge as authentic words of Newt Gingrich *only* those statements that are dissimilar from those of other Republicans.)

The members of the seminar relied on the other "criteria of authenticity" as well. Some, such as the principle of regarding material that is attested by multiple sources as more likely to be authentic, seem close to common sense (though the question of what counts as an independent source is rather controversial). Others, such as the principle that more complex versions of stories are later than simpler versions, depend upon debatable theories about how oral and literary traditions are transmitted.

The methodology of the Jesus Seminar described thus far does not seem too far out of line with the working assumptions of most New Testament scholars. It is true that many scholars take a less skeptical attitude toward the texts, and a great many have pointed out the limitations of the criterion of dissimilarity, which

would at best appear to capture what might be called the idiosyncratic elements of Jesus — those elements that fit with neither his predecessors nor his followers. What seems most unusual about the Jesus Seminar is the high reliance its members place on extra-canonical gospels, especially the Gospel of Thomas.

Thomas, discovered among other documents at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, is a gospel that consists largely of "sayings". Though the actual document dates from several centuries after the time of Jesus and is a Coptic translation of the original, some scholars theorize that Thomas is a very early source composed independently of the synoptic Gospels. Its existence gave added importance to a document called *Q*, never actually found, that had already been theoretically postulated to help explain similarities between Matthew and Luke that could not be traced to dependence on Mark. *Q*, like Thomas, is presumed to be largely a collection of sayings of Jesus. Since *Q* is supposed to be a source for Matthew and Luke, it is regarded as a document significantly older than those Gospels, and perhaps older than Mark. Thomas, *Q*, and noncanonical writings of a similar character suddenly took on new significance as scholars pondered the purposes of such collections. Since these "sayings" gospels contained no accounts of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, could it be that there were early communities of "Jesus-followers" for whom these events were unimportant?

Some of the more prominent members of the seminar think this speculative question can be confidently answered. Burton Mack, in his work *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, writes with breezy chutzpah about the hypothetical community that employed the hypothetical book *Q*. According to Mack, these people were not Christians; they were "Jesus-people" who cannot be seen as the early foundation of what later became known as the church. "The people of *Q* did not think of Jesus as a messiah, did not recognize a special group of trained disciples as their leaders...did not regard his death as an unusual divine event, and did not follow his teachings in order to be 'saved' or transformed people." (Interestingly, the Resurrection is not important enough to Mack for him to include it in this list as an item to be denied!)

What, then, was Jesus like, and why did such people follow him? The suggestion is that Jesus was a Jewish — though not-so-very Jewish — version of a wandering Cynic philosopher, a sage whose wisdom was presented in an aphoristic, unconventional style and whose content challenged the prevailing cultural and social assumptions. A portrait somewhat like Mack's is presented in John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, though Crossan does not go so far as Mack in seeing discontinuity between the early followers of Jesus and the church. Crossan's picture of Jesus puts special emphasis on table fellowship — Jesus' practice of eating with people of dubious moral and social standing. This "open commensality" was a proclamation of an "unbrokered kingdom of God," a new social order that meant an end to mediators and hierarchies.

Other Third Questers

This Jesus who is a Cynic sage — a "talking head," as one waggish critic has put it — is by no means the whole story of the third quest. Many members of the Jesus Seminar reject the idea that Jesus was a kind of wandering Greek philosopher. And many other scholars, including liberal ones, take very different views from those of the Jesus Seminar.

For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other discoveries have shed new light on first-century Judaism, and such scholars as E. P. Sanders have taken the quest down a completely different path. On this view, the key to an accurate reconstruction of the historical Jesus lies in highlighting the *Jewishness* of Jesus, rather than understanding him in the supposedly Hellenistic environment of Galilee. Though such an approach can be used to drive a wedge between the historical Jesus and the church, it does not have to do so, as is shown by N. T. Wright's significant work, *The New Testament and the People of God*. Wright argues that there was a spirited debate among first-century Jews as to how to tell the story of Israel as the people of God. In particular, how is the story to be completed? As Wright sees it, the early Christians told the story as culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which constituted the "great divine act for which Israel had been waiting." Such a view makes sense of both the Jewishness of the early church and its eventual distinctiveness as a rift with other versions as the Jewish story developed.

A number of important Roman Catholic scholars have joined in this third quest. Many of them, while professing allegiance to the same critical-historical method practiced by the members of the Jesus Seminar, come up with results which, though far from pleasing to naïve fundamentalists, are much more congruent with the Jesus of Christian theology. Raymond Brown, for example, in *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, sees the gospel accounts of Jesus' trials and executions as containing much that may reasonably be taken as historically authentic, a far cry from Burton Mack's sweeping dismissal of Mark's gospel as "a fiction."

The work of John P. Meier is particularly interesting as a test case of how critical-historical studies comport with orthodoxy. In his massive study, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (two volumes have been published, and a concluding volume is promised), Meier illustrates his commitment to such a method with an imaginary description of an "unpapal conclave." The scholarly reconstruction of the historical Jesus should proceed, Meier suggests, as if it were conducted by a committee consisting of a Christian, a Jew, and an agnostic who are locked in the basement of the Harvard Divinity School Library and fed bread and water until they produce a consensus document. On Meier's view, such a method cannot possibly arrive at many of the conclusions the Christian will want to affirm about Jesus by faith. It cannot, for example, assert that Jesus actually performed miracles (nor deny that he did). However, Meier himself thinks such an objective historical study will overlap with the church's teachings to a great extent; for example, though a good number of the miracle stories are judged to be later creations, in some cases we have good historical grounds for saying that in Jesus' own day he was *believed* to have performed miracles, whether or not he actually did.

What Does It All Mean For The Layperson?

The works mentioned above constitute only a small sampling of the newest quest for the historical Jesus. My purpose, however, is not to give a comprehensive scholarly overview but rather to ask, What does it all mean to me? What stance should the intelligent layperson take toward this quest? As a Christian believer, who holds that salvation depends on the life, death, and resurrection in the history of Jesus, I can hardly suspend judgment about such issues. We have here what William James called a "momentous option." My very life is at stake, and *practically* I cannot suspend judgment, since I must continue to live either as one who believes in this Jesus or as one who does not.

Should I simply ignore the whole business? Given the very public nature of the enterprise, this may not be possible. I recently had a conversation with a pastor planting a church in a suburban community. He told me that when he talks with his new parishioners, many of whom are previously unchurched professionals, they often inquire about such issues. They seem surprised that these scholarly claims have not been discussed in church, and they tend to think that the pastor is probably ignorant of such matters. A debate that is carried out in magazines and newspapers is no longer restricted to the ivory tower.

In any case, to ignore such intellectual challenges would appear to be a dishonest attempt to evade genuine intellectual problems. But there is a still better reason for avoiding ostrichlike maneuvers, and that is the possibility that historical-critical studies of the Bible might have genuine value for the Christian church. If the Incarnation really did take place in history, then it stands to reason that an understanding of the nitty-gritty world of first-century Palestine might indeed deepen the Christian's insight into Jesus of Nazareth.

The predicament of the layperson here is not unique. There are other cases where academic experts pronounce on issues about which laypeople must make up their own minds — in part, because the experts disagree among themselves. Experts may disagree on whether the world is in danger of global warming and on how to avoid it, but laypeople must vote for legislators committed to carrying out preventive and palliative actions. Economists may disagree on the impact of tax cuts, but I must decide for myself how to vote. So, too, with the quest for the historical Jesus.

Is Historical Scholarship The Best Way Of Coming To Know The Historical Jesus?

In the process of arriving at an independent judgment where experts disagree, it is often useful to try to isolate the assumptions the lie behind the experts' opinions — including the assumptions that almost all the experts take for granted as well as the ones that may underlie the disagreements. One crucial assumption that a great many biblical scholars seem to take for granted is *the historical-critical method is the best means of arriving at the truth about the historical Jesus*.

It is easy to see why such a belief should be assumed by historical scholars; after all, the historical-critical method was devised precisely as a way to transcend the biases and limitations of traditions and communities so as to discover historical truth. Why should it not be the best way to understand the life of Jesus?

Nevertheless, a little reflection shows that this principle is far from obviously correct. After all, the Christian believes that eternal life can be found in a relationship to Jesus of Nazareth, and that the path to such a relationship requires knowing about this Jesus. It is hard to believe that God could have acted in Jesus to make salvation possible for the human race and at the same time believe that knowledge of the story is possible only for those who have the intelligence and leisure to fight their way through the thicket of historical Jesus research. Surely, if knowledge of Jesus is as vital as Christians believe it to be, God would have made it possible for ordinary people to gain this knowledge without learning Aramaic or receiving Ph.D.'s in historical-critical biblical studies.

The church has always maintained that it is possible for ordinary people to gain the knowledge they need about the Jesus they meet in the gospel narratives. I think there are two primary accounts as to how this is supposed to happen, though these stories are by no means mutually exclusive, rival accounts. Both may be true and, in fact, can be seen as complementary.

One story, traditionally emphasized by the Roman Catholic church, though in principle open to Protestants, stresses that the knowledge the ordinary person needs to have about Jesus is grounded in the testimony of the church. On this account, the witness of the church with respect to life and teachings of Jesus is a trustworthy guide to the truth; ordinary people who rely on that authority are reasonable to do so. Historical scholars can hardly object to this by claiming that relying on authority is, in principle, unreasonable for the overwhelming majority of what all historical-critical scholars believe is based on their acceptance of the testimony of others.

The other story, which one might call the Reformed story because of its prominence in John Calvin (though it clearly is present in other Protestants as well as Catholics), lays great stress on what is termed "the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit." Calvin regarded the Bible as containing a divinely inspired account of what people need to know for salvation, and he argued that the truth of the biblical account can be grasped by ordinary people on the basis of the witness of the Spirit of God.

Calvin's story is sometimes disparaged as an appeal to an unverifiable subjective experience, but it does not have to be construed in such a manner. In talking about the "witness of the Holy Spirit," Calvin is giving a theological account of how people actually arrive at a conviction that Jesus is the divine savior. Suppose I begin to read the New Testament and, in some sense, I hear God speak to me through its pages: through the person of Jesus I hear God question me, make promises to me, give commands to me. As I think through those questions, promises, and commands, they begin to make sense of my life in a way I have never know. I gain a sense of who I am and who I should become, and I find myself gripped by a conviction that the story of Jesus I have encountered is *true*.

Such an account of faith does not necessarily divorce faith from knowledge. Some contemporary philosophers have theorized that knowledge is best understood as a true belief that is produced in a reliable manner. Thus I now know there is a computer screen in front of me, not because I can give a philosophical proof of this that would satisfy a skeptic, but because the belief is true, it is produced in a reliable manner, employing my sensory faculties. If the story of Jesus is true, and if the work of the Holy Spirit is similarly

reliable, it would appear that the outcome is also knowledge. (On this point, see my book *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*, 1996 Oxford University Press.)

One can see, therefore, that the assumption that the historical-critical method provides the best way of getting at the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth is open to question. What I have called the Catholic and Reformed stories may be false, but their truth or falsity cannot be established by historical scholarship alone; it requires theological and philosophical argument.

How Objective Are Historical Biblical Scholars?

Some of the more orthodox biblical scholars recognize the above point. Catholics such as John Meier, for example, stress that faith convictions are not limited to the conclusions of historical scholarship. However, the way Meier makes this point highlights another pervasive, yet dubious, assumption on the part of many New Testament scholars. This is the idea that historical scholars, in contrast to members of religious communities rooted in faith, are committed to an ideal of objectivity. This is nicely symbolized by Meier's idea of the "unpapal conclave" and expressed in E. P. Sander's portrayal of the biblical scholar who roots his conclusions in "evidence on which everyone can agree."

A dilemma arises at this point for someone like Meier who wishes to separate the conclusions of historical inquiry from the convictions of faith. Are the convictions of faith reliable or not? If they are, why should I the historian who is interested in truth employ them? If they are not, then why should the believer who cares about truth rely on faith?

The way out of this dilemma lies in questioning the dubious picture of the completely objective historian that lies behind it. The critical historian is not, after all, a person devoid of faith. Historical critics understand that their scholarly activity came into being at a particular time and place and therefore presupposes a cultural framework. Jon Levenson, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible who is himself a historical critic, has argued that even while recognizing this cultural framework, the members of this community, like every other, have tended to absolutize their cultural assumptions, their "faith." In practice, this has often meant that, among historical critics, the assumptions of the Enlightenment provide the lens for looking at the world.

It would be arrogant and foolish for the layperson to ignore or dismiss the work of the historical scholar. However, it is by no means too much for the layperson to ask the historical scholar, who is so keen on understanding human life in its cultural context, to have a sense of the relativity of historical scholarship itself. Once the "relativizer has been relativized," it will no longer be possible for the tribe of historical scholars to take a superior and arrogant attitude toward the members of religious communities, as if such communities were the only ones with biases.

There are good reasons why Christian scholars may wish to participate in academic "games" where the rules prevent them from appealing to some of what they know as Christians. Apologetic argument may require that one employ only assumptions that the intended audience will accept, and it is certainly interesting to see what may be known about Jesus without the testimony of the church of the saving work of the Spirit. Christian scholars must not, however, allow themselves to be hoodwinked into believing that this type of conversation is the only avenue to the truth, or that the results of such a game are the only convictions that deserve the honorific title "knowledge."

Where Do The Scholars Disagree?

What I am calling the relativity of historical criticism can be clearly seen when one examines the assumptions that are disputed among the scholars themselves. It hardly seems an accident that the conclusions of biblical scholars who are fairly orthodox in their theology tend to be historically conservative-to-moderate in tone. (I have in mind here scholars such as Howard Marshall, F. F. Bruce, Robert Stein, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and Catholics such as Raymond Brown and John Meier.)

Scholars who are less committed to orthodoxy or positively opposed to historic Christian faith, such as Mack and Crossan, often produce portraits of Jesus that are quite remote from church teachings. The latter type of scholar often speaks disparagingly of the former, implying that the more traditional scholar is less than fully committed to "calling them as they see them" and "letting the chips fall where they may." From my layperson's perspective, it seems evident that the prior commitments of the people like Mack may be pervasive in shaping the way *they* interpret the evidence.

That Mack does have an ideological ax to grind becomes evident in *The Lost Gospel*. He there explains that it is crucial to cultural progress to undermine the historical claims of traditional Christian faith: "The Christian gospel, focusing as it does on crucifixion as the guarantee for apocalyptic salvation, has somehow given its blessing to patterns of personal and political behavior that often have had disastrous consequences." Christianity is at least partly responsible for such evils as colonial imperialism, the slave trade, and the Indian wars. It is only when we recognize that the founding Christian narrative is a mythical creation that we will be free to criticize it and perhaps to devise better, more socially progressive myths. There is much that could be said about Mack's claims; my point here is that he should not pretend that he and other members of the Jesus Seminar approach the historical evidence with no ideological commitments. Goulder, in his recent work *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions*, reads the New Testament as containing the records of a war between the Petrine and Pauline missions in the early church. These two camps warred long and hard over the proper attitude of a follower of Jesus toward the Jewish law, with the looser Pauline camp eventually winning and freeing Christians from circumcision and Jewish dietary laws. From Goulder's point of view, the Petrine camp was certainly closer to the perspective of the historical Jesus.

Now in the Gospels Jesus is represented as saying rather different things about the law. Sometimes, as in Matthew 5, he appears to stress the validity of the Law: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law, until all is accomplished." At other times, Jesus seems to take a looser line on such issues as Sabbath keeping and food regulations, claiming "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath" and that it is not the food that comes into a person that makes him impure but the words that come out of his mouth (Mark 2:27; 7:15).

How do Goulder and Mack treat such passages? Both are committed to "historical-critical" investigation; both are determined to throw off the "shackles of church dogma." Nevertheless, they reach completely contradictory judgments in this case. For Mack, passages that manifest a cavalier attitude to the Law probably stem from that wandering Cynic sage who loved to thumb his nose at convention. Passages that represent Jesus as affirming the Law are a creation of the later church, intent on domesticating the hippielike free spirit of Jesus. For Goulder, the Matthean passage where Jesus upholds the Law certainly represents the kind of attitude a pious Jew such as Jesus would have held. The Markan passages where Jesus takes a freer line are the creations of a Pauline partisan anxious to justify a laxer attitude. Whatever else one may want to say about this dispute, it seems apparent that neither party can argue that the historical-critical approach has led to *objective certainty* about the matter.

Although critical scholars often stress the uncertain character of historical scholarship, I do not think it is easy for the unwary reader to keep in mind *how* uncertain and speculative their conclusions often are. Burton Mack again provides an excellent example. His claim that the most reliable historical portrait of Jesus comes from the hypothetical document *Q* depends on the following chain of probabilities (and doubtless more than these):

The probability that Mark was the first of the synoptic Gospels. If those who argue for the primacy of Matthew are correct, then there is no need to postulate *Q* at all.

The probability that Matthew and Luke both drew on a common *written* source. Even if Matthew and Luke drew on Mark and other sources, it is possible the other sources were oral traditions.

The probability that this written source can be accurately reconstructed. Since we know *Q* only from what Luke and Matthew supposedly took from it, it is difficult to know what the actual document, if it existed, contained.

The probability that this source was an important document for a community. Even if *Q* existed and can be reconstructed, it is not certain that this document actually functioned as a gospel for a religious community.

The probability that this hypothetical community, if it existed, regarded *Q* as containing all that is religiously important about Jesus. The claim that *Q* does not contain any information about the death and resurrection of Jesus, even if true, does not imply that the community may not have known about and valued this knowledge.

Such probabilities as the above are "chained" or "linked" probabilities. The final probability of the whole is obtained by multiplying the probability of each link in the chain, each of which obviously must be less than 1.0 percent (following the usual convention of assigning probabilities on a scale from 0 to 1). Multiplied fractions get small very quickly; for example, .7 times .7 times .7 is only .343. My mathematical skills are not formidable, but it is clear that even if the probability of each link in the chain is estimated to be relatively high (and in some cases, such an estimate can only be described as dubious), the probability of the whole theory is low indeed.

In fact, Mack's theory is even more improbable than the above implies. For when one examines *Q*, one finds Jesus to be an apocalyptic pronouncements to a later stage, created by the community. But there is no independent evidence for the existence of early and late versions of *Q*, nor any objective basis for recognizing some parts as earlier than others.

It would be interesting to take some actual contemporary documents that have undergone multiple revisions, perhaps involving multiple authors with different viewpoints, to see if it would be possible for a reader with no external knowledge about the process to determine the "layers" of the composition. As someone who has been part of such a process, I think that this would be practically impossible, even for a reader who had detailed knowledge about the authors involved. It is hard to see how this could be done at all for an ancient document where the supposed authors and communities are known only from the text being studied. When Mack begins to postulate these layers of composition in order to save his theory, it should be painfully obvious that *Q* is no longer functioning as evidence for his portrait of Jesus, but rather is itself being interpreted in light of the portrait.

What do these disagreements and the resulting uncertainties imply? They do not imply that the scholars involved in the disputes are never justified in holding their views. Indeed, if we reject Enlightenment epistemologies, some of the disputed views may even amount to knowledge. My own discipline of philosophy provides a close analogy. Disagreements in philosophy are pervasive, but this does not imply that no philosopher has good grounds for philosophical beliefs or even knows any philosophical claim to be true.

What is implied by the disagreements in both cases is that the views of scholars on disputed questions cannot provide a strong basis for laypeople to form beliefs. Anyone acquainted with the history of philosophy knows that little rational weight adheres to the fact that a large number of philosophers at a particular time hold a certain view. In the fifties, the majority of philosophers in England and America probably thought some positivist form of the verifiability theory of meaning was correct, but today such a view is almost abandoned. Similarly, it seems to me that the views of a group of New Testament scholars, even if they constitute a majority, carry little authority for outsiders if respected scholars equally conversant with the facts continue to disagree with that majority.

If the layperson had to rely solely on historical scholarship as the means of forming historical beliefs about Jesus, then agnosticism might be the most reasonable policy, at least with respect to some important issues. However, I have already argued that the Christian should not accept the idea that historical scholarship is

the only source of knowledge about Jesus. Christian believers take themselves to have good grounds for their beliefs about Jesus. Although historical evidence will almost certainly be a part of these grounds, the total story will also include either the testimony of the church or the testimony of the Spirit (or both). One might say that the ultimate ground of faith in Jesus for an individual is the total circumstances of his or her life in which the truth of the gospel has become evident.

Thankfully, the work of the Jesus Seminar has stimulated a flurry of orthodox, critical responses, including such works as *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, edited by Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, by Ben Witherington III; and *Cynic Sage or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies*, by George A. Boyd. Such contributions clearly reveal the dubious assumptions and shaky reasoning behind much of the current quest. As a layperson, it is vital for me to know that scholars conversant with ancient languages and texts see the historical evidence as consistent with historic Christian faith.

However, it is equally vital to realize that Christ's church does not stand or fall with the changing fashions of a contemporary academic field. My Christian beliefs are not primarily grounded in historical scholarship but in the testimony of Christ's church and the work of Christ's Spirit, as they witness to the truth of God's revelation. Do my convictions continue to be reasonable when challenged by historical scholarship? In this situation, the uncertainties of critical historical scholarship undermine any pretension that the field has a sure authority for the layperson. They leave the original ground for Christian belief undefeated.

Christians can certainly learn from this quest, and they can be grateful for the believing scholars among the questers. Christians should not, however, think that their own pilgrimage from death to life requires a detour down this particular scholarly trail.