

# Chapter 1

## The Historical Jesus, the Death of Jesus, Historiography, and Theology

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IN HISTORY, AS ELSEWHERE, FOOLS RUSH IN, AND THE ANGELS MAY PERHAPS  
BE FORGIVEN IF RATHER THAN TREAD IN THOSE TREACHEROUS PATHS THEY  
TREAD UPON THE FOOLS INSTEAD.<sup>1</sup>

~G.R. ELTON

When academics stand before an audience and explain a view of the historical Jesus—in this case how Jesus understood his own death—and when the historical Jesus case is made in the context of a theological discipline and education, the scholar may think he or she is walking on water, but the voices of truth are calling out to the scholar to watch each step. The waters tend to swallow.

Shorn of metaphor, we might say these voices of truth ask three questions: What is history? What is a historical Jesus? What role is that historical Jesus to play in the theological curriculum? Each question needs to be answered, but particularly the third because very few historical Jesus scholars operate in a vacuum. Each makes meaning on the basis of the historical reconstruction. In the context of this monograph the questions are more focused: How did Jesus understand his own death? And, while not the specific focus of this monograph, What role is a reconstruction of how Jesus thought about his death to play in the theological curriculum and, in particular, in how one understands atonement?

Various answers might be proposed now in a preliminary and imaginative way.<sup>2</sup> One might say that Jesus did not think about his death in any profound sense and that, therefore, it was the early Christians who narrated a story that imputed meaning to that death. For some, such a chasm between Christian faith

I am grateful to Paul Copan for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Crowell, 1967), 89.

<sup>2</sup> See ch. 2, under “Some Highlights in the History of Scholarship.”

and what Jesus actually thought would jar the foundations of faith; for others, the chasm might provide space for free thinking. One might, alternatively, argue that Jesus thought of his death in profoundly soteriological terms, even if undeveloped, and that the early Christians unfolded the theology Jesus gave to his impending death. And, however one answers these questions, many think that *whatever* answer one comes to ought to shape one's theology, and some are bold enough to think that the church, or at least the enlightened within the church, ought to revise its understanding of faith accordingly.

As I said, to come to terms with how Jesus understood his own death means we have to come to terms with three questions—about history, about the historical Jesus, and about the role of historical reconstruction in theological meaning-making. We begin with the first question: what is history?

### MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF TAXONOMY<sup>3</sup>

Historical Jesus scholars appropriate a historiography, though very few of them spell their historiography out.<sup>4</sup> Those historiographies can be conveniently labeled postmodernist and modernist, with all sorts of shades within each label as well as a spectrum of how those historiographies have been used by historical Jesus scholars.<sup>5</sup> The most complete historiographies by historical Jesus scholars

<sup>3</sup> For a good survey of the history of historiography, see E. Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). It is not possible here to provide full bibliographies on matters historiographical. The standard journal is *History and Theory*.

The term *historiography*, which usually refers to the “history of historical studies” or (less often) to the “writing of history,” is frequently used in scholarship as shorthand for “philosophy of history.” When I speak of historical Jesus scholars operating with a historiography, I intend that to mean “a philosophically based, whether conscious or not, perception of what can be known about the past and how what can be known is discerned and represented.” Peter Novick’s well-known *That Noble Dream* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8, n. 6 states: “the once respectable word ‘historiology’ has dropped out of just about everybody’s vocabulary, and ‘historiography’ has had to do double duty for both ‘historical science’ [in which I would include the ‘philosophy of history’] and descriptive accounts of historical writing [i.e., ‘the history of history’]. ~~Strictly speaking, ‘the objectivity question’ is an historiological~~ [concerns the science of history] issue, but all historians speak of it as ‘historiographical.’ Go fight city hall.” If Novick keeps the sword in the scabbard, I shall as well (and stand behind him).

<sup>4</sup> An informed study in this regard is the article by Halvor Moxnes, “The Historical Jesus,” *BTB* 28 (1999): 135–49. He studies the historiography, with reference to “master narratives,” of J.P. Meier, E.P. Sanders, R.A. Horsley, J.D. Crossan, and B.J. Malina. For my own survey of trends in Jesus studies, see “Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies* (ed. S. McKnight and G.R. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 149–76. See the recently published D.L. Denton Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies* (JSNTSup 262; London: T&T Clark, 2004). This study was unfortunately not available to me during my research, but his emphasis on the role of holism and the place of narrative (or story) in historiography are most welcome and accord with the direction of my own understanding.

are those of N.T. Wright in the first two volumes of his multivolume series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*,<sup>6</sup> and the recent introduction by James D.G. Dunn in his *Jesus Remembered*.<sup>7</sup> While other studies are intensely informed at the level of philosophical discussion and technical method—one thinks of B.F. Meyer, J.P. Meier, J.D. Crossan, and Dale Allison,<sup>8</sup>—few are actually proposing a historiography as have Wright and Dunn. The reason I say this about Wright and Dunn (with reservations, of course), will become clear in our survey of postmodernist and modernist historiography, but in brief it is this: Wright proposes a plausible Jewish context and a plausible story for what Jesus was all about, while Dunn proposes a plausible method (oral traditioning) as the most likely process out of which the Jesus traditions grew and, thereby, Dunn is redefining what “authentic” means.<sup>9</sup> Both Wright and Dunn have put forth theories that are and will continue to reshape studies in the historical Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> A good textbook on how to do history is M. Howell and W. Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 29–144. The historiography of Wright was then worked out in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (*Christian Origins and the Question of God* 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 11–336. Dunn’s book is a landmark when it comes to the exploitation of “oral theory” for understanding the Jesus traditions, though there is debate on how he understands that oral tradition and just how memory works. For his most recent statement, see Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). On oral tradition, see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); T.C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency* (WUNT 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Jan./Feb. 2005). See the recent responses to Dunn in B. Holmberg, “Questions of Method in James Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 445–57; S. Byrskog, “A New Perspective on the Jesus Tradition: Reflections on James D.G. Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 459–71; and Dunn’s response: “On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 473–87.

<sup>8</sup> B.F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 76–110, who famously adapted Bernard Lonergan’s studies for historical Jesus scholarship; see also B.F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 17; Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989); *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical [Glazier], 1994); J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (3 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991–2001), 1.1–201; J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); on Crossan’s method, one must see the critical evaluation of D.C. Allison, Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 10–33.

<sup>9</sup> One might say that there are three strands of historiography among historical Jesus scholars whose works will be cited when appropriate: (1) those of a modernist bent include scholars as diverse as N. Perrin, J.P. Meier, E.P. Sanders, B.D. Chilton, and M. Borg, even though their theologies differ wildly; (2) those of a postmodernist bent include E. Schüssler Fiorenza and perhaps James D.G. Dunn; and (3) those of a mediating line include N.T. Wright and more likely Dunn (his historiographical epistemology is chastened modernism rather than consistently postmodern). The critical separation occurs over the relation of Subject (historian) and Object (Jesus/Gospels/ancient evidence). The closer one gets to the Subject dominating the discourse, the closer one gets to the

*POSTMODERNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY*

Whatever postmodernism has going for it or against it, it has the confidence that when it comes to the matter of historiography it alone has the goose by the neck. Take, for example, Keith Jenkins, the United Kingdom's most confident postmodernist historiographer and (as is sometimes said of the radicals) "boadeconstructor." Jenkins defines postmodernism as the "era of the aporia"; that postmodernism is a stance taken by *le tout intelligentsia*.<sup>10</sup> That is,

By aporia I mean that this is an era when all the decisions we take—political, ethical, moral, interpretive, representational, etc., are ultimately undecidable (aporetic). That our chosen ways of seeing things lack foundations and that, as far as a discourse like history is concerned, it is essentially to be thought of as an aesthetic—a shaping, figuring discourse—and not as an objective, true, or foundational epistemology.<sup>11</sup>

And:

There are not—and nor have there ever been—any "real" foundations of the kind alleged to underpin the experiment of the modern; that we now just have to understand that we live amidst social formations which have no legitimising ontological or epistemological or ethical grounds for our beliefs or actions beyond the status of an ultimately self-referencing (rhetorical) conversation.<sup>12</sup>

Jenkins at times fawns over the earlier Hayden White, even though White isn't so antifoundationalist.<sup>13</sup> White, America's leading postmodernist (or, more

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postmodernist enterprise. The closer one gets to seeing the Object as capable of speaking for itself, simply by uncovering the earliest original material, as is clearly the case with J.P. Meier, the closer one is to the modernist enterprise.

<sup>10</sup> A potent critique of Keith Jenkins and other postmodernists can be found in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (rev. ed.; London: Granta, 2000). See also G. Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2004); K. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2000), whose rhetoric rivals Jenkins. There is no embracing definition of postmodernism, and what I mean by postmodernist historiography essentially can be narrowed down to Jenkins himself. There is not space here to develop the spectrum of postmodernist historiographies. On this, see K. Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, *Refiguring History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 71 (Introduction, n. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, *On "What is History?"* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins also utilizes Richard Rorty at a deep level. See Jenkins' *On "What is History?"* 97–133. While I'm only loosely conversant with Rorty, I am aware that Jenkins relies on the "linguistic turn" of Rorty but fails in his most recent book (*Refiguring History*) substantially to engage Rorty's later "pragmatist turn" and, even more recently, his "romantic polytheism turn," both of which put strain on Rorty's earlier linguistic turn and, therefore, on the cogency of Jenkins' appeal to Rorty. See R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). A summary can be found in J. Boffetti, "How Richard Rorty Found Religion," *First Things* 143 (2004): 24–30. See also R. Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square," *JRE* 31 (2003): 141–49. According to the English philosopher Bernard Williams, Rorty's philosophical pragmatism was running on

accurately, structuralist) historiographer,<sup>14</sup> essentially claims that all history writing is a narrative created in the head of the historian out of discrete facts from the past.<sup>15</sup> His fundamental work *Metahistory* provided a taxonomy of the sorts of narrative games historians play. As a result, scholars today often speak of the linguistic turn in historiography, a radical reshaping of the discipline developed by postmodernists under the influence of the logocentrism of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty.

Everything a historian writes, it is claimed (rather objectively) by those like White and Jenkins, is emplotted in a narrative—and it is the narrative that matters in that it shapes the content. There is in that narrative, as White expresses it, “an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena.”<sup>16</sup> The narrative one historian tells differs from the narrative another historian tells because they are telling different stories—as opposed to one story being less accurate as it corresponds to, or better yet coheres with, the “facts.” Therefore, history is all rhetoric, all discourse, all language, and in effect all autobiography.<sup>17</sup> History is, after all, nothing but historiography, the history of histories and the history of historians.

The impact of this theory is at times quixotic. History, the postmodernist says, is the study of ancient texts, not the ancient past; it is, in other terms, *phenomenalism* (rather than *critical realism*, about which we will have more to say below). In effect, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Christianity and Classical Culture* (to pick an egregious example) are simply different readings of phenomena, but neither is right, neither is wrong. Any search for the “best explanation” is removed from the map.<sup>18</sup>

Of a less extreme nature and whose work will not be explored in detail here, F.R. Ankersmit’s recent study *Historical Representation* marks a singular advance on Hayden White in underscoring and developing what it means to provide a *narrative* about the past. Recognizing the inevitability of the historian’s need to turn discoveries into narrative, Ankersmit finds *representation* to be the most

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empty and led to changes: see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 59.

<sup>14</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and, with some clear modification, *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> See Jenkins, *Re-thinking History; On “What is History?”; Why History?* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” in his *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>17</sup> For another recent study along this line, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation (Cultural Memory in the Present)*; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> On this, see P. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (2d ed.; International Library of Philosophy; London: Routledge, 2002).

plausible term for what is done, and he explores the significance of that term as the key factor involved in historical undertakings. Representations are linguistic “things” and they do not “refer to” so much as they are “about” the past.<sup>19</sup> A representation offers to the reading public a metaphor.<sup>20</sup> The discipline of history writing, of providing a re-presentation, is about subjectivity and aesthetics.<sup>21</sup> Whatever representation a historian puts forward is a proposal, and little more than that. It is not that historians build upon one another to construct an edifice of certain knowledge.

Hence, history as a cathedral to which each historian contributes a few bricks for the greater glory of common effort has given way to history as a metropolis in which everybody goes their own way and minds their own business without caring much about what others do.<sup>22</sup>

Inevitably, postmodernist historians like Jenkins and Ankersmit have their share of critics.

A leading historiography all dressed up in the attire of a previous generation and who calls out from the starboard side of this debate, Sir Geoffrey Elton, calls the postmodernist approach to history the “ultimate heresy” and “frivolous nihilism.”<sup>23</sup> A modernist historiographer<sup>24</sup> like Elton, Jenkins says in his accusing manner, thinks he is getting at the “facts” and “finding the truth,” but in effect that sort of history can be turned on its head, as deconstructionists gleefully do, to see little but the historian’s own narrative tale. As Richard Evans, who stands near on the starboard side Elton, sums it up:

The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in faithful fashion but rather, like the novelist, only gives the appearance of doing so.<sup>25</sup>

Jenkins throws down the gauntlet more than once: when speaking of (upper case) History, he says, “I mean, nobody really believes in that particular fantasy

<sup>19</sup> Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Another helpful study of history as the exploration of mental metaphors is that of J.L. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 75–103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> G.R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins defines modernism as follows: “It is a general failure . . . of the attempt, from around the eighteenth century in Europe, to bring about through the application of reason, science and technology, a level of personal and social wellbeing within social formations which, legislating for an increasingly generous emancipation of their citizens/subjects, we might characterise by saying that they were trying, at best, to become ‘human rights communities’” (*On “What is History?”* 6).

<sup>25</sup> R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 98. Another staunch response to the postmodernist trend in historiography can be found in Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old*, who is more concerned with the predominance of social history over political history. But, for her take on postmodernist historiography, see pp. 15–30.

any more” and when he speaks of (lower case) history, he says that view “is now unsustainable.”<sup>26</sup> St. Paul had his thorn in the flesh and we, I’m prone to say, have the postmodernists. They keep us on our knees. Or, on our heels.

Roughly speaking, “History” pertains to macroscopic visions of history—like the Bible, like Augustine, Hegel, and Marx (an odd box of chocolates, to be sure), while “history” pertains to the microscopic attempts to shed light on smaller corners of real people in the real past. Except that there are some who believe the former, including many historical Jesus scholars—who have the confidence (and this is no strike against him), like Marcus Borg, to think that what they find in the past about Jesus has historic significance for understanding both history and life.<sup>27</sup> In fact, nearly every historical Jesus scholar operates at least with a lower-case history, and many with an upper-case sense of History.

We must be careful at this point because postmodernism is often inaccurately caricatured. It is not that there is no past and no attempt at description of that past. For postmodernist historiographers like Jenkins, there is indeed a past, a present, and a future. That past can be characterized as containing “facts,” that is existential facts or better yet discrete facts. And, in contrast to what some Gospel Jesus scholars now claim, the historian can at times determine those facts or find them in spite of their present location within narratives (like the Gospels). However, those facts are discrete, according to the postmodernist, in that they are unrelated, uninterpreted, and meaningless in and of themselves. The facts are a proliferated, disparate lot.

Which means that whenever such a proliferation and dispersal is disciplined into some specific unity, into some specific sort of significance [that is a historical

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 8, 9.

<sup>27</sup> See the trajectory shaped in Marc Borg’s writings by his *Jesus, A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) to his most recent *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

Martin Kähler laid down the maxim that Christian faith could not be based on the results of historians. Historians themselves mock his claim. Nearly every historical Jesus scholar I know believes in the portrait of Jesus he or she has painted on the canvas after historical research. Nor, so I think, can Kähler sustain the claim that “historical” knowledge and “theological” or “systematic” knowledge are epistemologically that different. Faith is inevitably shaped by what one knows and is not as certain as Kähler would like, and what one knows is shaped by one’s historiography and epistemology. In other words, both faith and historical knowledge are shaped by a probabilistic epistemology at some level. On this, see Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (ed. and trans. C.E. Braaten, 1896; rpr. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

While it is wise to contend that the church’s faith is not to shift every time a new historical Jesus study is offered, it is unwise to think that this is simply an epistemological issue. Put slightly differently, the church’s faith is rooted in the New Testament and in the historic creeds, not in the shifting results of scholars; but that knowledge of the NT and the creeds contains a historiography and a “narrative” in the mind of every individual believer. The reason L.T. Johnson’s *The Real Jesus* struck a nerve with Christian historical Jesus scholars is because he contended for a creedal faith, even if he mistakenly appealed to a Kähler-like foundation for such a contention. See *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

narrative] . . . then that unity is not, and cannot be, one which has arisen from the dispersed facts themselves; is not one which has arisen from the sources, but is a unity which is and can only be logically derived from outside these things—from theory; only theory can give history any unity of significance . . . theory ultimately reasserts itself as the inescapable determinant of meaning.<sup>28</sup>

Historians can make statements about these dispersed (or discrete, or existential, or proliferated) facts, and they can also connect them chronologically to form a chronicle, but that is not what history really is. History is the spinning of a narrative out of discrete facts in order to ascertain meaning. Importantly for the postmodernist historian, to discover facts is not to discover meaning. Meaning is created by the historian, who tells a narrative as a piece of aesthetics. Hayden White, who can be called back to the deck on this very question, sees history as a form of literature and not a form of science.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Jenkins claims,

we [all of us, so it seems] recognise that there never has been, and there never will be, any such thing as a past which is expressive of some sort of essence, whilst the idea that the proper study of history is actually “own-sakism” is recognised as just the mystifying way in which a bourgeoisie conveniently articulates its own interests as if they belonged to the past itself. . . . Consequently the whole “modernist” History/history ensemble now appears as a self-referential, problematic expression of “interests,” an ideological-interpretive discourse without any “real” access to the past as such; unable to engage in any dialogue with “reality.” In fact, “history” now appears to be just one more “expression” in a world of postmodern expressions: which of course is what it is.

... modernist renditions are now naïve: their historical moment has passed.

Saying true things about the past at the level of the statement is easy—anybody can do that—but saying the right things, getting the picture straight, that is not only another story but an impossible one: you can always get another picture, you can always get another context.

... then precisely insofar as the narrative endows real events with the kind of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature, we are justified in regarding such a construct as an allegory.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, history as a discourse is not an epistemology.

Bingo! There you have it: a postmodernist understanding (with neo-Marxism as its tarragon) of what historical Jesus scholars are actually—unbe-

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 82–83.

<sup>29</sup> See White, *Metahistory*.

<sup>30</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 9, 10, 21, 24. “Own-sakism” is a critique of Sir G.R. Elton, who will be examined below.

knownst to them—doing: they are simply asserting their power and ideology through an aesthetic presentation about Jesus. Since postmodernism is the only game in town, it is the game historical Jesus scholars are playing. It would not be unfair, though it would be edgy, to describe postmodernist historiography as *semiotic fascism*. Words, and only words, rule—totally. Their own game of words is itself, ironically, a metanarrative.

Which view shows us that just about anything is possible in the world of scholarship.

Historical Jesus scholarship becomes, in Jenkins' categories, bourgeoisie—and it is the proletariat (read: postmodernist historiographers) that now runs the game. The classical studies of Joachim Jeremias, Geza Vermes, Ben Meyer, E.P. Sanders, M. Borg, J.P. Meier, J.D. Crossan, N.T. Wright, B.D. Chilton, and James D.G. Dunn turn out, in this neo-Marxist and linguistic turn, to be nothing but ideologies, nothing but personal expressions of power. They simply emplot the events or existential facts about Jesus in a narrative, and it is the narrative that determines which facts are to be emplotted. Each narrative is a game of power, played by the author and his intended audience. And, what makes one presentation of Jesus “true” and another “not true” or “less than true” is that the true one is connected to persons in power while the not true or less than true ones are not. Truth, then, is little more than the voice of privilege.<sup>31</sup> It might be easy for one historical Jesus scholar to make this accusation against another, but it is harder to admit that one's accusation itself is only the same game of power.

As Jenkins puts it in a way that “goes all the way down” to the bottom of the soul,

Postmodern historians think that human beings can live ironic, reflexive, historicised lives, without the magic, incantations, mythologisations and mystifications spun by certaintist historians from across the board in both upper and lower cases. Postmodern historians see their own histories as being made not for “the past itself” but for themselves and for people whom they like (for when, they ask, was that ever not the case?).<sup>32</sup>

This is a bitter pill to swallow for most of us, and it is not the sort of thing often heard in historical Jesus scholarship, though some theologians have banged this drum for a few decades. Are they not, as the philosopher Bernard Williams suggests, “pecking into dust the only tree that will support them” when they abandon any goal of objectivity, any sense of truth having some sense of correspondence or coherence, and of texts having the intention of communicating?<sup>33</sup> In the coherency theory of truth, one could say that one's “re-presenta-

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 38–39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 19. See below, under “Historical Jesus Studies and the Theological Discipline.”

tion” *characterizes* truth even if it does not *constitute* that truth.<sup>34</sup> But, as Jenkins counsels us, because we can’t get to the truth, sometimes we just have to take our medicine, or swallow the dust, and hope to get better—which would mean we would need to stop thinking that what we are doing is what we are really doing, and start recognizing that we are nothing but ideologues.

This postmodern critique of historical scholarship, it needs to be recognized, is not the old, standard pointing of fingers within historical Jesus scholarship. This is not E.P. Sanders criticizing Joachim Jeremias for having a Lutheran gospel grid through which he forces Jesus; nor is this Marc Borg arguing that previous scholars have not sufficiently recognized the religious genius of Jesus; nor is this N.T. Wright claiming that previous scholars have not sufficiently recognized the profound grasp Jesus had on Israel’s story; nor is this Jimmy Dunn contending that previous scholars have not recognized the significance of oral traditions.

No, what Jenkins is accusing us of is far more profound, and it closes the books on nearly every historical Jesus study ever done. He is saying that we are not finding the “real” Jesus behind the texts, the rediscovery of whom sheds light both on the real Jesus and a more genuine and authentic and historical faith. He is arguing that we are simply fooling ourselves: what we think we are doing is not what we are doing. We are not finding Jesus back there, hidden for all these years by the church and others. What we are “finding” is nothing; we are “imposing” pleasing narratives about our own ideologies in order to assert our own power. We impose our power in the form of rhetoric about Jesus. Historical Jesus scholars don’t have a goose by the neck, after all; instead, they have a mirror by the top and they are looking at themselves. History, he is saying, is not the past. History is a narrative using discrete facts about the past. This sort of history is more imagined than it is found. The past remains there, discoverable in its historiographical representations (like the Gospels), but meaningless until it is spun into a narrative. History makes discoverable and discrete and existential facts meaningful; but the meaning one finds is not what happened, not the past itself, but a narrative spun in the mind of the historian.

Sometimes, of course, we recognize that historical Jesus scholars have such a heavy agenda that any notion of objectivity (which Jenkins excoriates) is tossed into the winds, but I’ve not yet met many who think they ought to abandon objectivity and instead simply tell a narrative of their own choosing, gathering bits and bobs of discrete facts and spinning them into a metanarrative of meaning. At least not at the conscious, intentional level. It ought also to be noted that the claim that there is no objectivity is ultimately a claim for an alternative objectivity rather than an alternative to objectivity.

Not all go “all the way down” with Jenkins. For instance, a standard textbook in the United States for history classes is that of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt,

<sup>34</sup> I owe this observation to Paul Copan.

and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*.<sup>35</sup> While they appreciate and learn from the postmodernist perspective that history is created in the mind rather than a simple discovery of the past and that history writing shapes culture, their concern is to present a chastened postmodernist or, as I interpret them, an enlightened modernist perspective.<sup>36</sup> However we classify them, the authors mediate the voices—they are neither radical postmodernists nor classical modernists. In fact, they offer a stunning critique of classical modernism in their study of the “heroic model of science.”<sup>37</sup> They can provide in this chapter a bridge to the modernist agenda in historiography.

For instance, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob (AHJ) think the historian can find truth. Thus, in commenting on the discovery that science itself was historically conditioned and can be called to account as a historicist undertaking, AHJ observe: “Science can be historically and socially framed *and still be true*.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, appealing to the value of realism, AHJ observe that “realism permits historians to aim language *at things outside themselves*.”<sup>39</sup> The age-old quest for objectivity, disinterestedness, and distance in an effort to let the ancient world speak has led to renewed appreciations of what objectivity really is, and AHJ build on the work of E.H. Carr and approach critical realism (see below the following section on modernist historiography) when they say that:

We have redefined historical objectivity as an interactive relationship between an inquiring subject and an external object. Validation in this definition comes from persuasion more than proof, *but without proof there is not historical writing of any worth*.<sup>40</sup>

And, this “persuasion” is defined as the result (progress?) of scholarly discussion:

Objectivity is not a stance arrived at by sheer willpower, nor is it the way most people, most of the time, make their daily inquiries. Instead it is the result of the clash of social interests, ideologies, and social conventions within the framework of object-oriented and disciplined knowledge seeking.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994) [= AHJ]. The three are historians (at the time of printing) at UCLA. Both Moxnes and Dunn use the study of these three historians in their attempts to come to terms with a more responsible historiography.

<sup>36</sup> At times this study recalls E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures [January–March 1961]; New York: Knopf, 1962; 2d ed. 1987), especially in how the authors articulate what “objectivity” is (see pp. 241–70). For example, this comment dissociates the authors from Jenkins: “Every time people go down the relativist road, the path darkens and the light recedes from the tunnel” (192). In fact, they say, “In the final analysis, then, there can be no postmodern history” (237).

<sup>37</sup> AHJ, *Telling the Truth about History*, 15–125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 171 (italics added).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251 (italics added).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 261 (italics added).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

As if to counter the work of Jenkins before his time, AHJ say,

What this book insists upon is the human capacity to discriminate between false and faithful representations of past reality and, beyond that, to articulate standards which help both practitioners and readers to make such discriminations.<sup>42</sup>

It is unfair to AHJ to cut them off at this point, but space forbids a lengthy analysis of their important place in the discipline. Yet, one of their comments transcends our space concerns, a comment that best expresses what history is all about: “The human intellect demands accuracy while the soul craves meaning.”<sup>43</sup>

*(MORE OR LESS) MODERNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY*

Keith Jenkins remonstrates with two historians whose books have shaped the modern discussion of historiography: the works of E.H. Carr<sup>44</sup> and G.R. Elton.<sup>45</sup> If Carr, in his soft Marxist *modus operandi*, contends that a fact becomes history only when it is absorbed into a meaningful history by a historian, Elton represents pure modernism: history is the attempt to find out what happened and why *for its own sake*, in its own context, in its own terms, and its own meaning.<sup>46</sup> Carr thinks what matters is how we can use the past to predict and shape the future, while Elton thinks what matters is not how something can be used but what it was really like—to use the famous Rankean expression, *blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, (“simply to show, how it really [or, essentially] happened”).<sup>47</sup> While both Carr and Elton are Rankean to one degree or another, Elton is the post-Rankean Ranke. And Carr and Elton did not get along, famously.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>44</sup> Carr, *What is History?* See also J. Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity* (New York: Verso, 1999); M. Cox, ed., *E.H. Carr* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Elton, *Practice of History; Return to Essentials*. Teachers know that one of the most proven ways to get students to learn is to present polar opposites so that students can find their own way. This, I suppose, is why Carr and Elton have proven so popular (though more modern-day historians currently are Marxist, and more inclined toward Carr than toward Elton). I suspect Jenkins and Evans can replace Carr and Elton as dialectical opposites.

<sup>46</sup> Thus, Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 19: “Thus, historians are never in a position—and should never imagine themselves as being in a position—to read a source without attention to both the historical and historiographical contexts that gave it meaning.”

<sup>47</sup> L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen and germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Sämtliche Werke 33/34; 2d ed.; Leipzig: Duncker & Humboldt, 1874), preface to 1st edition, vii (*apud* G. Theissen and D. Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* [trans. M.E. Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 43). For years I have said *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, while many omit the *ist*. I am happy to see in Theissen and Winter a correct citation.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Elton, *Practice of History*, 12–22. Carr, who was a Marxist, gets this insult from Elton: “Marxism . . . [is] a truly remarkable achievement of scientific insight and ill-controlled speculation” (37).

To play with the image we have already used, if Jenkins claims that both Carr and (especially) Elton are not holding the goose by the neck but a mirror instead, Elton has a counter. The modernist will claim that Jenkins, by admitting that his own ideology shapes his history, is the one with a mirror in his hands and that the goose can be had—if one has strong enough hands. In addition, the modernist historiographer is ashamed that Jenkins is proud of his own stance. Elton and his ilk will lay claim to the fact that it is they who have the goose by the neck, even if at times they are humble enough to admit their grip is tenuous, and at times the goose escapes. But at least, Elton would say, the modernist historian is interested in the goose of what remains from the past and not the mirror of a present ideology.

Jenkins thinks Elton's methodology is as passé as drinking tea from one's saucer, while Elton thinks Jenkins is cracked—cup and saucer. Jenkins may claim that postmodernism is no longer an option for historians but is instead the fate and condition of all who are at work at all time, but Elton (were he still alive) would simply say . . . perhaps I should use Elton's own words that get at this with his own savage wit:

No one reads or writes history in a fit of total absentmindedness, though a fair amount of history has been written by people whose minds seem in part to have been on other things.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, Elton would think Jenkins has his mind on other things (and his eyes on a mirror), while Elton thinks he's got his own hand around the goose's neck and Jenkins' neck (the mirror was left at home as he trotted off to the library).

Whether the goose image is useful or not, the majority of historical Jesus scholarship can be categorized as Rankean, post-Rankean, *and* modernist. That is, they are concerned with finding facts, discovering what those facts meant at their time and in their original context, and then setting out an interpretation of those facts in a way that best corresponds to the originals. Perhaps the most representative modernist historians in early Christian studies (with footnote referencing omitted) would be scholars like Martin Hengel, E.P. Sanders, J.P. Meier, Richard Bauckham, and David Aune.

They aim to be scientific—hence preoccupied with method and neutrality and objectivity, and they breathe the air of the hopeful—hence convinced that proper methods, intelligence, and the suppression of one's own views can lead to an ever enlarging knowledge base about the past and its value for the present and future. This is a modernist historiography at work, though I'm not so sure most historical Jesus scholars are as conscious of this as perhaps they ought to be. What modernist historians assume is that language is not simply self-referential but is also other-referential.

<sup>49</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 39.