

[*JSHJ* 3.1 (2005) 61-108]
DOI: 10.1177/1476869005053903

PRESUPPOSITIONS AND PROCEDURES
IN THE STUDY OF THE 'HISTORICAL JESUS':
OR, WHY I DECIDED NOT TO BE A 'HISTORICAL JESUS' SCHOLAR

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a detailed description of the presuppositions and procedures of a representative group of six scholars currently contributing to the study of the 'historical Jesus'. The intention of the study was to draft a 'handbook', a 'recipe', of the best methods and the surest presuppositions for achieving the result of a solid historical conclusion about Jesus. What resulted from the project was not what had been hoped. In fact, what resulted was a deep scepticism about the quest, at least as it is currently being conducted. Though, admittedly, not offering solutions, this article seeks to raise questions about the real potential and usefulness of any quest for the so-called 'historical Jesus'.

Key words: confessional scholarship, method, methodology, presuppositions, quest for the historical Jesus, tradition criticism, E.P. Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, John P. Meier, N.T. Wright, Gerd Theissen, Dale C. Allison

Introduction

If you have spent any length of time in Britain in the last few years you will surely recognize the name Jamie Oliver. Visit most flats in Britain and you will find a Jamie Oliver cookbook not far from the kitchen countertop. Jamie is a 20-something, English bloke who is passionate about food; and—I am not afraid to admit!—I have been captivated by his passion. I have purchased his cookbooks, watch his TV shows, regularly grocery shop, and plan dinner parties. This new-found passion, of course, is to the delight of my wife and friends. Jamie has made cooking cool! No Delia Smith or Emeril Lagasse here. One thing that captivates me about cooking is the opportunity to create a delicious dish. I love thumbing through one of Jamie's books, finding a recipe, following it carefully

and ending up with an incredible meal. I think the great thing about cooking is that you have a clear objective, a final product in mind, and a recipe to get you there: a goal and a very specific procedure to follow.

A desire for this kind of formula was what gave birth to this study of procedures and presuppositions of Jesus scholars. I was in the first year of my PhD research and was determining whether my project on Jesus would be conducted from a so-called 'historical perspective' or within a particular Gospel's theological purview. So, the exploration that ensued, which resulted in this essay, was very pragmatic: if I want to study Jesus as a historical figure free from the confines of the Gospel's post-Easter perspective, how do I do it? Thus, rather like comparing several recipes in order to find the best one for a certain dish, I investigated the procedures and the presuppositions of six historical Jesus scholars. In conversation with them, I intended to develop a clearly defined set of procedures informed by critically formulated presuppositions. My goal was to end up with a personal handbook on studying the historical Jesus that could guide me through my research.

The six scholars chosen for the study were E.P. Sanders,¹ John Dominic Crossan,² John P. Meier,³ N.T. Wright,⁴ Gerd Theissen (and Dagmar Winter),⁵ and Dale C. Allison.⁶ Admittedly, the list of scholars chosen is somewhat *ad*

1. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), *idem*, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1989).

2. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991); *idem*, 'What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N.T. Wright on *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *SJT* 50 (1997), pp. 345-79; *idem*, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

3. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (ABRL, 1; New York: Doubleday, 1991); *idem*, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (ABRL, 2; New York: Doubleday, 1994); *idem*, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Companions and Competitors* (ABRL, 3; New York: Doubleday, 2001).

4. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); *idem*, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, 2; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); *idem*, 'Theology, History and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh', *JSNT* 69 (1998), pp. 105-12.

5. Gerd Theissen, 'Historical Scepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research', *SJT* 49 (1996), pp. 147-76; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

6. Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

hoc.⁷ The list does, however, represent a cross section of scholarship from different countries and religious backgrounds.⁸ What is more, they represent *current* and *viable* approaches to the study of Jesus. And, while it would have been interesting to consider minority voices, these six scholars are representative of mainstream research in the field of historical Jesus studies. The scope of the study is limited to the introductory sections of their works as well as other places where the author allowed the reader to see his methods and presuppositions.⁹ In the following discussion the scholars are ordered chronologically.

The aim of this project was not ultimately accomplished, however: I did not end up with a ‘handbook’ or ‘recipe’ for studying Jesus. Additionally, the argument of this essay has become somewhat negative in a way I did not intend. This essay argues the need for an urgent reassessment of the pursuit of the ‘historical Jesus’ by (1) assessing the contributions of significant figures in the field of historical Jesus research, and (2) identifying areas in presupposition and procedure that, in my view, make the current pursuit problematic.

Assessment of the Presuppositions and Procedures

E.P. Sanders

E.P. Sanders first wrote about the historical Jesus in 1985 in a groundbreaking work entitled *Jesus and Judaism*.¹⁰ Subsequently he has co-authored a book on the Synoptic Gospels,¹¹ which concludes with three chapters dedicated to the question of studying the historical Jesus, and he has written a smaller volume called *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.¹² He does not discuss in any detail the presuppositions he brings to his study of the historical Jesus, yet three can be noted from interacting with his works. In the introduction of *Jesus and Judaism* he notes three general aspects of the current study of Jesus that he assumes to be established and clearly act as guiding presuppositions.¹³

7. The study included the work of the Jewish scholar David Flusser (*Jesus* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968]), but was ultimately left out of the assessment because it lacked a significant methodological discussion and the study was already lengthy with six.

8. They represent a diverse background both religious (Catholic and Protestant) and national (American, English and German).

9. This investigation does not claim to be exhaustive not least because the study of the presuppositions and procedures within the introductions was only rarely traced through the body of the work.

10. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*.

11. Sanders and Davies, *Synoptic Gospels*.

12. Sanders, *Historical Figure*.

13. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp. 1-3.

Presuppositions. The first of these is the conviction that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish and what he said, and that his actions and words make sense within a first-century Jewish context. Sanders, in addition, has the conviction that faith and history should be kept separate when studying the Jesus of history. Sanders is neither interested nor concerned about the significance of the historical Jesus for theology. He writes, 'I am interested in the debate about the significance of the historical Jesus for theology in the way one is interested in something that he once found fascinating'.¹⁴ He maintains, then, though not stating so directly, the Enlightenment *dichotomy* between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Third, he believes that the most fruitful methodology in historical Jesus studies is one that constructs hypotheses that, 'on the one hand, do rest on material generally considered reliable without, on the other hand, being totally dependent on the authenticity of any given pericope'.¹⁵

Beyond these, the scholarly dictum that the *surest evidence* is the most secure is another important pre-judgment found to underlie his work. This bias leads him to two further convictions: (1) he grounds his reconstruction of Jesus on 'deeds' or 'facts' about Jesus that he considers *indisputable* and which also can be established with some degree of independence from the rest of the evidence;¹⁶ and (2) he divides up the knowledge about Jesus according to its degree of certainty: 'beyond reasonable doubt (certain), highly probable, probable, possible, conceivable, unprovable, and incredible'.¹⁷ Yet, Sanders makes quite a

14. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 2.

15. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 3.

16. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2nd edn, 1997), pp. 119-20, helpfully summarizes the 'facts' about Jesus which Sanders thinks are 'indisputable'; Sanders's lists vary somewhat between the earlier and more recent work and the following is a combination of the two:

(1) Jesus was born about 4 BC, near the time of the death of Herod the Great; (2) Jesus spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village; (3) Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist; (4) Jesus called disciples; (5) Jesus spoke of their being twelve; (6) Jesus confined his activity to Israel; (7) Jesus taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee; (8) Jesus preached 'the Kingdom of God'; (9) About the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover; (10) Jesus engaged in a controversy over the temple, and created a disturbance in the temple; (11) Jesus had a final meal with his disciples; (12) Jesus was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest; (13) Jesus was executed by the Romans outside Jerusalem on the orders of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate; (14) Jesus' disciples fled; (15) Jesus' disciples 'saw' him after his death; (16) As a consequence they believed he would return to found the kingdom; (17) They formed a community or identifiable movement to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah; and (18) At least some Jews persecuted at least some parts of this movement, a persecution which seems to have lasted until near the end of Paul's career.

Witherington observes the interesting point that the list grew from the earlier to later work though there are no major changes or retractions.

17. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 321.

distinctive methodological move when he contends that a context or a framework of interpretation into which one can plug the disparate data of the Jesus tradition must be established independent of the authenticity of individual traditions. He writes, 'no matter what criteria for testing the sayings are used, scholars still need to move beyond the sayings themselves to a *broader context* than the summary of their contents if they are to address historical questions about Jesus'.¹⁸ This 'broader context' for Sanders, following Albert Schweitzer, is Jewish eschatology.

For Sanders, the canonical Gospels are the primary source of information on Jesus. He assumes tradition criticism's conclusions related to form-criticism: 'in the case of Jesus we must be prepared to admit that we *never* know the immediate context... We accept the basic form-critical principle that the evangelists had individual units and that they supplied narrative settings'.¹⁹ However, with respect to source-critical questions, he goes a different way from the majority by departing from the two-source theory. Sanders (with Davies) outlines his view of the interrelationship of the Synoptic Gospels in *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*. They summarize:

We think that Matthew used Mark and undefined other sources, while creating some of the sayings material. Luke used Mark and Matthew, as well as other sources, and the author also created sayings material... It is our judgment that this shows that the literary relations are in fact complex. Those who have defended the two-source hypothesis by complicating it, and those who have proposed other complicated solutions, have seen something. They have seen that there is no one answer which easily solves everything.²⁰

It is interesting to note here that Sanders does not hold to a Q document of any kind. Lastly, Sanders does *not* consider the non-canonical Gospels as valuable sources for the historical Jesus. He writes, 'I share the general scholarly view that very, very little in the apocryphal Gospels could conceivably go back to the time of Jesus'.²¹

Procedures. Sanders's procedure follows a three-step process. The first step is the establishment of an interpretive framework. This is necessitated, of course, by Sanders's form-critical presupposition noted above: for the authentic parts of the Jesus tradition to have any meaning, a context outside the Gospels must be found in which to place them. According to Sanders, a securely established context employs three kinds of information: (1) the 'indisputable' facts about Jesus; (2) knowledge about the outcome of his life and teaching; and (3) knowledge of first-century Judaism.²²

18. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 17.

19. Sanders and Davies, *Synoptic Gospels*, p. 339.

20. Sanders and Davies, *Synoptic Gospels*, p. 116.

21. Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 64.

22. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 1.

Sanders deems the so-called ‘Temple controversy’ to be the ‘most secure’ of the ‘indisputable facts’ and, so, the most appropriate place to enter ‘the circle of interpretation’.²³ Having established the meaning of that ‘fact’ within restoration eschatology,²⁴ he then seeks to place it plausibly within the setting of first-century Judaism. The result of this first stage is a contextual framework for the activity of Jesus. The diverse traditions in the Gospel accounts, which he will deem authentic in step two, can then be placed into this framework and a more comprehensive picture of Jesus can be had.

Once the context is secure, a second stage focuses on the sources. The Gospel traditions are evaluated according to four traditional criteria of authenticity (see Table 1) and placed on a spectrum between poles of certainty and incredibility. Sanders uses the following four criteria:

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
Cross-examination	A passage or a theme is shown to be historically reliable if it is directly against what the evangelists wished to be so or conversely it is historically unreliable if it agrees too closely with what they wished
Uniqueness	Material can be safely attributed to Jesus if it agrees neither with the early church nor with Judaism contemporary with Jesus
Multiple Attestation	A passage is more likely to go back to Jesus if it has been preserved in two or more sources which are independent of each other
Views Common to Friend and Foe	What a friend or foe agreed on is presumably reliable material

Table 1. *Sanders’s Criteria of Authenticity*²⁵

The last stage of the procedure is that of forming a hypothesis. Now in this final stage the individual bits of information are placed into the broad-based interpretive framework and a hypothesis about Jesus is suggested. Sanders argues that a convincing historical description of Jesus is one that places Jesus credibly within first-century Judaism, provides an explanation for the Christian movement and offers a connection between his activity and his death.²⁶ He writes, ‘One is looking for a hypothesis which explains more (not everything), which gives a good account (not the only one) of what happened, which fits Jesus realistically into his environment, and which has in view cause and effect’.²⁷

23. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp. 10-12.

24. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 71.

25. Sanders and Davies, *Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 304-33.

26. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 5.

27. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 58.

Sanders's hypothesis offers up a Jesus who: (1) was not unique in his own time, but fits neatly into the religious climate of first-century Judaism; (2) saw himself as sent as God's last messenger before the establishment of the kingdom; (3) claimed that the kingdom of God was for the outcasts—the weak, poor and lowly—who would have a leadership role in it; (4) was apolitical in the sense that he was not leading an insurrection against Roman rule; (5) executed for demonstrating against the temple by the Romans through the agency of the temple authorities; (6) disappointed at death;²⁸ and (7) laid the foundation for the formation of a messianic movement after his death and resurrection.

Assessment. Sanders's presuppositions and the procedures marked a significant advance in the study of the historical Jesus. His work comprises distinctive features that others have subsequently taken up and developed further. First, Sanders was convinced that Jesus must be placed plausibly between first-century Judaism and early Christianity. No reconstruction of Jesus which did not place him plausible within these poles could be acceptable. Second, he was one of the early scholars who rejected the 'bottom-up' empiricist historical approach, which was the standard procedure at the time, by contending that a historian of Jesus must seek to develop a guiding hypothesis and not simply build up evidence independently until an argument emerged. Third, and related to this, Sanders forcefully reintroduced Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus and argued that a Jesus firmly set within Jewish restoration eschatology was the most plausible hypothesis. This conclusion was based on a fourth contribution because it depended on Sanders's belief that the surest evidence on which to build a reconstruction was so-called 'indisputable facts'.

The strength of Sanders's approach, however, does not overcome its fundamental weaknesses. I suggest at least five presuppositional and procedural weaknesses. Because four of the five points of critique, to a greater or lesser extent, will be equally applied to other scholars in this essay, I will take time to develop them here. First, scholars have criticized Sanders for discounting much of the 'sayings' material as evidence for Jesus and they have pointed out the fallacy of his procedure of divorcing the sayings from the deeds. J.P. Meier writes, 'one cannot hope to interpret the actions without a context of interpreting words, just as the words float in a vacuum without an interpretive context of deeds...in short, I find any dichotomy in the treatment of Jesus' words and deeds questionable in theory and unworkable in practice'.²⁹

Second, Sanders's list of 'indisputable facts' is open to question. R.J. Miller rightly observes that the unanimous consensus about these facts stands with near

28. Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 276.

29. Meier, *Mentor*, p. 465; Mark Allen Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1998), p. 129.

absence of argument or evidence.³⁰ One might very well call into question the validity of an unanimous consensus. Who are those who consented to this list? How many scholars are required for a consensus to form? And if many of those who made up this ‘consensus’ actually thought more facts could be considered ‘sure’—why are there just these facts? Most of the authors that I have surveyed in this paper have—in similar and in differing ways—appealed to ‘scholarly consensus’ as evidence for their argument or have argued for the need for a consensus to form. This seems, however, not only wholly unrealistic, but it is also an inappropriate foundation from which to argue a case. D. Allison rightly critiques Crossan’s insistence on scholarly consensus and his critique equally applies to Sanders’s approach. He perceptively argues that the reality in the humanities is that interpretations and texts are *always* up for grabs: ‘it is the rule rather than the exception that the sources for important historical figures do not allow definitive reconstructions but rather generate abiding contention’.³¹ And if this is true for a figure like Abraham Lincoln, how much more will it be true for Jesus of Nazareth? With this critique I am neither advocating isolationist readings of Jesus, nor am I implying that scholarly interaction is unimportant or unnecessary to the historical endeavour. Yet, I wish to point out the fact that a scholarly consensus is not a sure foundation on which to build a historical argument about Jesus. For the same reason, I question the validity of the assumption, which is held by some, that a consensus on points of method and fact should be a stated goal of our scholarly research.

Third, in his use of the criteria of authenticity he assumes, as do most scholars (cf. Crossan and Meier below), that it is possible to differentiate between layers in the tradition. One need ask, however, to what extent this is really possible. If, for the sake of argument, the canonical Gospels represent a coalescence of traditions at an early stage in their formation, can they really be separated into categories of their diverse origin: this one came from Jesus, this one did not? Given this scholarly assumption, it seems relatively impossible to dissect the Jesus tradition into constituent parts with enough certainty to adjudicate historical conclusions. Distinguishing the origins of Gospel traditions is on a par with attempting to divide a river into its constitutive parts: what water came from the main source and what came later from tributaries.³² No criterion can take us

30. Robert J. Miller, ‘The (A)Historicity of Jesus’ Temple Demonstration: A Test Case in Methodology’, in Eugene Jr. Lovering (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP, 30; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 235-52 (236).

31. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 12.

32. See similarly Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 33; G.B. Caird (*New Testament Theology* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], pp. 348-49) believes this opinion is an error of historical criticism. He challenges the belief that the gospel tradition is made up of layers that can easily be peeled back like an onion. Caird also rejects Bultmann’s sceptical view (*Jesus and the Word* [London: Collins, 1958], p. 17) that Jesus tradition which appears in the Synoptic Gospels is

back far enough to have any real confidence in our conclusions about what is actually from Jesus and what is not.³³

While in the face of a mountain of historical Jesus studies, which claim to do this very thing, this assertion may appear to be naïve and unfounded. Yet, a survey of publications reveals that scholars are *not* able to legitimately distinguish one origin from another. This reality is seen in the plethora of diverse pictures of Jesus available today in the scholarly marketplace; so many are there that the discipline seems more like a Baskin Robbins than a Krispy Kreme.

A fourth critique is levelled against Sanders's foundational philosophical presupposition, namely, the epistemological basis for the pervasive scholarly axiom of 'surest evidence'. The Jewish NT scholar D. Flusser first pointed to the problem in Sanders's presupposition by expressing his concern with the philosophical approach: 'areas which are characterized as *less certain* still exist, and a scholar who follows Descartes' method is induced to restrict his search for causal connection to the relatively secure points'.³⁴ Though Flusser only expresses the concern, the Christian philosopher C.S. Evans works to dismantle the epistemological basis of this type of investigation and remove it from its pride of place in historical scholarship. According to Evans, recent works in epistemology have demonstrated the weakness and ultimate inadequacy of 'classical foundationalist' or 'evidentialist' viewpoints. The essence of this epistemology is that a belief must be based on empirical evidence. What is more, the strength with which those beliefs are held must be in proportion to the strength and quality of the evidence that supports them. Evans summarizes the point, 'Our epistemic duty [according to Locke] is to examine all the "grounds of probability", and then proportion our degree of belief to the degree of probability the evidence gives the proposition in question'.³⁵ Thus, classic foundationalism, argues Evans, requires at least three things, (1) access to a body of highly certain facts that is sufficient to be the foundation of our beliefs; (2) an ability to determine what evidential support these facts lend to our other beliefs; and (3) an ability to regulate our

'composed of a series of layers which can on the whole be clearly distinguished... in whatever betrays the specific interests of the early church... must be rejected as secondary'. Caird, however, insists that 'the interests of Jesus and those of the early Church were hardly so mutually exclusive that what may be ascribed to the one must be denied to the other'.

33. Cf. Allison (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 7-10): the problem of Faustina.

34. David Flusser, 'Sanders' Jesus and Judaism', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 56 (1986), pp. 246-52 (252), emphasis added.

35. C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 209. After writing this article I came across an equally significant critique of this 'evidentialist' method in Alan G. Padgett ('Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus', in Stephen T. Davis [ed.], *The Resurrection* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], pp. 287-307 [p. 290]), who labels this Enlightenment assumption a 'myth'.

beliefs so as to conform to the evidence.³⁶ While avoiding the pitfalls of an ‘anti-realism’ epistemology, Evans rightly argues that foundationalism is a dubious position for two reasons. First, we do not have access to an adequate body of facts that are known with certainty; and, second, we do not have ‘voluntary’ control over our beliefs that this stance requires.³⁷ He opts for what is called an ‘externalist’ epistemology that is similar to the critical realism of Wright.

A final critique, and possibly the most fundamental, is Sanders’s insistence on the separation of theology from history both at the level of historical inquiry and the sources. G.B. Caird sees this as one of the fundamental errors of the historical critical method. He comments: ‘the first error has been to assume that the Jesus of history was a different person from the Christ of the Church’s faith’.³⁸ Caird’s assessment is correct and I contend that the scholarly peremptoriness, which insists on the severance of confessional faith from history, should be dethroned as the only *academically legitimate* approach to the study of Jesus. What is more, the question should be raised as to whether or not the pursuit of a de-confessionized Jesus is actually wrongheaded, since, as J.D.G. Dunn has recently written, ‘the only realistic objective for any “quest of the historical Jesus” is the Jesus remembered... And the Jesus thus remembered *is* Jesus, or as close as we will ever be able to reach back to him’.³⁹ As much as one may wish to hold to such a disconnect in theory, as it would make for more ‘objective’ results, in reality and in practice it cannot be maintained: there is no accessible Jesus of history who is distinct from faith! At least one reason for this is that the Gospels themselves, like all historical narratives, are a selective history. They are a narrative of the events from a particular point of view for a particular purpose.⁴⁰ Thus, even before we look into the Gospels for historical information

36. Evans, *Historical Christ*, p. 210.

37. Evans, *Historical Christ*, p. 211.

38. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 346-47.

39. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making, 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 335, emphasis his.

40. Cf. J.B. Green’s critical reflection of the methodology of historical Jesus scholars in his article, ‘In Quest of the Historical: Jesus, the Gospels, and Historicisms Old and New’, *Christian Scholars Review* 28.4 [1999], pp. 544-60 [555]. On this point he writes: ‘“History”, then, is marked by two non-negotiable elements: selectivity and narrativity. Like ethnographic treatments, history is always *partial*—both in the sense of “committed” and in the sense of “incomplete.” If there is to be an historical account at all, decisions must be made, lest the past be distilled into an infinity of singularities and indifference wherein everything is of equal hermeneutic value. Events must be chosen, but must also be coordinated within an interpretive web, in a narrative of causal relations... Events are chosen in light of the interests of the communities who formulated their own histories and the historians who inscribe them into a historical narrative. The historian, then, is no innocent bystander’ (p. 556)

a theological move has already been made on the part of the evangelist; as M. Bockmuehl has argued, we cannot go back ‘far enough to find a Jesus of history who is not already a Jesus of the interpreter’s faith or unbelief’.⁴¹

Yet, the converse must be equally affirmed: the historical pursuit of Jesus is not contrary to faith. Neither the ‘faith-ness’ of the first historical narrative nor the faith (or lack thereof) that I possess as a modern interpreter will nullify the importance or relevance of history for the study of Jesus. I affirm that history is of fundamental importance for Christian faith. As Caird has also stated, ‘[w]ithout the Jesus of history the Christ of faith becomes a Docetic figure, a figment of pious imagination, who, like Alice’s Cheshire cat, ultimately disappears from view. There remains no person about whom we have any evidence’.⁴²

The question, however, is: *what is the definition of ‘historical Jesus’?* Who or what is the object of our study; who is the ‘historical Jesus’? Would the real Jesus please stand up? J.B. Green has his finger on the point when he raises the question of the appropriate hierarchal position of ‘historical’ reconstructions of Jesus in understanding who the real human Jesus was:

We can hardly suggest that the quest of the historical Jesus is unimportant or irrelevant. It is nevertheless worth asking what status our reconstructions of “the real human Jesus of Nazareth” might have. Must we...accord privilege, even authoritative status, to the Jesus our historians, even our most able ones, are able to reconstruct? What of the status of the Gospels that give witness to Jesus’ life in its significance, the Old Testament that points to his coming, and the New Testament that takes as its fundamental point of departure the advent of the Messiah?⁴³

Admittedly, the length of this first section on Sanders will seem slightly out of proportion compared with the others. This is due primarily to the fact that weaknesses, which are shared by others and will be pointed out later, have been developed here: (1) appeal/pursuit to/for consensus; (2) overconfidence in the usefulness of tradition criticism (historical criticism); (3) foundationalist epistemological stance; and (4) an insistence on the separation of faith from history. Moreover, in many respects Sanders’s work also, to a greater or lesser extent, has become the foundation for many of the subsequent works on Jesus and this fact reveals the importance of his work.

John Dominic Crossan

J. D. Crossan is a prolific researcher on the historical Jesus. His most detailed work, called *The Historical Jesus*, was published over a decade ago and he has published no less than nine subsequent books—most notably *The Birth of*

41. Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 23.

42. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 346-47.

43. Green, ‘Quest’, p. 555.

Christianity—and has contributed to several others. From the outset of his work on Jesus, Crossan was concerned about methodology and method.⁴⁴

Presuppositions. In both *The Historical Jesus*⁴⁵ and *The Birth of Christianity*⁴⁶ Crossan has described his presuppositions and procedures. In his discussion on the Gospels, he defines presuppositions as ‘historical conclusions reached at an earlier stage, but taken for granted in the present argument’.⁴⁷ Hence, the predilections he believes he brings to his work on Jesus are solely related to the Gospels: their number, nature and relationships. Crossan specifically states that he does not include ‘dogmatic or theological acts of faith’ within the idea of presupposition.

Although Crossan is correct to emphasize the obvious fact that prior judgments about the character of the Gospels affect one’s view of Jesus, it seems to me that those historical judgments about the Gospels are *rooted* in more fundamental assumptions. Therefore, it is not adequate to limit presuppositions simply to ‘historical conclusions reached at an earlier stage’ as Crossan does. Presuppositions encompass much more than ‘historical conclusions’. Presuppositions consist of everything one brings to the texts one is handling—philosophical beliefs, theology, and culture—and they influence decisions at every stage in the process of historical Jesus study. I will briefly list several preconceptions that influence Crossan before examining his consequent procedures.

First, he opines that he is concerned with ‘honesty’, not ‘spurious objectivity’. Crossan wishes to avoid pursuing a historical Jesus project based on an assumption of ‘unattainable objectivity’.⁴⁸ While at first sight this seems a welcomed perspective—indeed it is time for the scholarly guild to shed its obsession with ‘unattainable objectivity’—Crossan is unable to deliver what he promises. His answer to the problem, which he calls ‘attainable honesty’, is an equally spurious quest of methodological consensus.⁴⁹

Another presupposition is Crossan’s positivistic confidence in his ability to excise from the Gospels the earliest ‘stratum’ of Jesus tradition. This is not an uncommon presupposition among historical Jesus scholars, but Crossan is more extreme than most. According to Crossan, all Gospel texts contain three layers: the *earliest stratum* (‘the voice of Jesus’); the *intermediate stratum* (‘the anonymous voices of the community talking about Jesus’); and the *latest stratum* (‘the voices of Gospel authors’).⁵⁰ They are, however, woven together in the Gospels

44. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. xxviii.

45. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. xxvii-xxxiv.

46. Crossan, *Birth*, pp. 95-149.

47. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 95.

48. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. xxxiv.

49. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. xxxiv.

50. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 140.

to the extent that they are all the voice of Jesus himself. In order to conduct a study of the historical Jesus or ‘the earliest communal continuation from Jesus’, a scholar must establish ‘the specific strata appropriate to those interests’.⁵¹ An *inventory* of ‘first stratum’ texts, therefore, must *precede* the interpretation of the historical Jesus. *The Historical Jesus* is essentially a study of the traditions that he has decided are in the ‘earliest stratum’.⁵²

Finally, his suppositions related to the sources for Jesus must be noted. For Crossan, both the canonical (what he calls ‘intracanonical’) and non-canonical (what he calls ‘extracanonical’) Gospels are primary sources for information on Jesus. In regard to the canonical Gospels, he holds to a radical version of the traditional two-source hypothesis. Although he holds a rather traditional view of Markan priority, he refers to Q as the ‘Q Gospel’ and believes that ‘it is a Gospel in its own right, with textual, generic, and theological integrity, and not just a source. It is also possible to discern redactional layers within its compositional history’.⁵³ Additionally, Crossan believes that the Gospel of John is *dependent* on the Synoptics, although containing an independent tradition of sayings and miracles. With regard to the non-canonical sources, Crossan is in a *very* small minority of scholars who hold to the independence of the *Gospel of Thomas*. He contends, ‘the *Gospel of Thomas* is independent from any and all of the four intra-canonical Gospels. It was composed originally without their use (before their existence?), but there may be minor traces of their influence during later transmission and transcription’.⁵⁴ Crossan, moreover, is virtually alone in his view of the independence of the *Didache* and the existence and independence of the *Cross Gospel*. Of the *Cross Gospel* he writes, ‘there exists within the present *Gospel of Peter* a consecutive source. . . the *Cross Gospel* is a passion-resurrection narrative quite different from that in Mark’.⁵⁵

Procedures. In this later work, *The Birth of Christianity*, Crossan labels his general procedure as an ‘interdisciplinary method’ and in its general structure his procedure resembles Sanders’s with one fundamental difference.⁵⁶ Crossan argues for a method that applies anthropology, history, archaeology and literary criticism to the same subject. In addition, he describes his method as: (1) interactive, involving the reciprocal interaction of these disciplines; (2) hierarchical, moving upwards from the first to last of the four disciplines; and (3) sequential, beginning with context, not text.⁵⁷ Crossan’s procedure involves three stages:

51. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 141.
52. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 427-50.
53. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 119.
54. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 119.
55. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 119.
56. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 146.
57. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 147.

context, text, and conjunction. First, *context* designates the study of the environment in which Jesus lived by means of cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology, Judeo-Roman history and archaeology. The goal in this first stage is to establish the ‘sharpest possible reconstruction of the 20s in lower Galilee’.⁵⁸ As was noted earlier, the motivation underlying this first stage is the need to have an interpretive framework in which to place the historical traditions culled from the sources. The next stage is *text* and identifies the procedure of stratification of sources. Drawing on the language and imagery of archaeology, Crossan thinks that the work of a biblical scholar in the Gospel sources is similar to that of an archaeologist. The Jesus scholar employs ‘textual stratigraphy’ to discern the ‘earliest stratum of tradition’. This process is required because of the highly genetic process of absorption within the sources.

In practice the process of stratification of sources involves several steps.⁵⁹ First, all the relevant sources both canonical and non-canonical must be inventoried. Next, these sources are grouped into one of four chronological strata (30–60; 60–80; 80–120; and 120–150 CE). The sources are then divided up into *complexes*. A complex, although not clearly defined, includes all the sayings referring to a motif or theme (such as ‘kingdom and children’) and is made up of *independent sources* (e.g. *Gos. Thom.*) and *units* (the number of individual passages represented).⁶⁰ The fourth step is the identification of complexes with *multiple attestation* amidst independent sources. In practice, one is simply tallying up how many independent sources attest to a specific complex. Finally, a judgement is made regarding the authenticity of the complexes. Two factors are considered in the determination of authenticity: the *date of the strata* in which the complex appears and the *number of times it is attested*. Thus, the earliest and the most attested traditions are those that most likely go back to Jesus. Crossan sets out his conclusions on the 522 complexes he inventories in an appendix with a (+) if it goes back to Jesus, with a (–) if it does not, and with a (±) if it is undeterminable for reasons of ‘metaphorical or metonymical content’ (though just what he means by this is not made clear).⁶¹

58. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 148.

59. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. xxxii–xxxiii.

60. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. xxxiii; a complex looks like this:
 20 *Kingdom and Children* [1/4]
 (1) *Gos. Thom.* 22.1–2
 (2) Mk 10.13–16 = Mt. 19.13–15 = Lk. 18.15–17
 (3) Mt. 18.3
 (4) Jn 3.1–10

The complex has four sources; that is, four independent attestations, as indicated by the numbers in the rounded brackets (the ‘[1]’ refers to the strata in which the complex falls); and it contains six units: it appears in six separate passages in the Gospels. Crossan does not focus on the units, ‘but on *complexes* and on asking whether the core of the complex goes back to Jesus’.

61. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 427–50.

Crossan has termed the last stage of his methodology *conjunction*. Here the sharpest image of *context* and the earliest layer of *text* are linked and it is in their joining that one is on the surest footing historically to reconstruct the historical Jesus. The conjunction leaves Crossan with a Jesus who was: (1) a peasant—one who was rurally poor and basically powerless;⁶² (2) a Jewish Cynic—a Cynic was one whose practice, lifestyle and mindset were in opposition to the cultural heart of the Mediterranean world; ‘it was a way of looking and dressing, of eating and living, and relating that announced its contempt for honor and shame, for patronage and clientage’;⁶³ (3) a non-apocalyptic prophet inaugurating the ‘brokerless kingdom of God’; and (4) a social and political revolutionary who promoted religious and economic egalitarianism that negated the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power; this strategy was the combination of free healing and common eating.⁶⁴

Assessment. Insofar as Crossan’s procedures are innovative, his work cannot be overlooked. His pursuit of a scientific and sophisticated methodology has forced Jesus scholars to critique Crossan’s methodology while clarifying and spelling out their own. A significant contribution of Crossan is the comprehensive interdisciplinary method with its focus on anthropology, history, archaeology and literary criticism. Although in structure it resembles Sanders’s approach, it is clear that Crossan’s careful system has resulted in a much more refined, broad-based and scientific method than has been constructed previously. Another area in which Crossan’s research has distinguished itself is in its openness and defence of the validity and usefulness of all early sources for the study of Jesus. Crossan has managed to muster few who would wish to follow his eccentric views on the non-canonical Gospels, but this has not deterred him in the least. His tact is especially interesting, however, in light of his obsession with consensus. One would have thought that Crossan’s presupposition would have tended to marginalized minority positions, as Meier’s position does (see below). Yet this is clearly not the case. A final distinctive of Crossan’s work is his use of the criterion of ‘multiple attestation’ to the exclusion of other criteria.

As a tribute to Crossan’s work, he has received a good deal of scholarly criticism. I use the word ‘tribute’ because the criticism is due in part to his desire to develop a ‘publicly usable’ method.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the criticism, in most cases, is warranted because, in spite of his efforts, his work has significant weaknesses.

Crossan shares four of the five weaknesses pointed out in Sanders’s work: obsession with consensus, the insistence on divorcing confessional faith and

62. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 125-27.

63. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 421.

64. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 422.

65. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 145.

history, a classical foundationalist epistemology, and a positivistic confidence in his application of tradition criticism.⁶⁶ Additionally, two other criticisms can be levelled against Crossan's work. First, though Crossan's method of stratification has the appearance of scientific objectivity, D. Allison has concluded that the historical inferences taken from the statistical information cannot be trusted. This conclusion rests on Allison's careful study of Crossan's stratification procedure which resulted in the observation that it relies on the controversial dating of sources and the arbitrary division of chronological strata.⁶⁷

Second, Crossan does not allow the Gospels to be used as historical sources for the formation of the initial historical context for the life of Jesus. This seems to me to be an error, since it would be better to use all available information (including the Gospels as historical documents in their own right) to inform the context. Judeo-Roman history, for example, is recorded in literary sources, so why is that literary evidence factored into the context and not at least some of the historical evidence in the Gospels? Sanders's procedure clearly has an advantage over Crossan's at this point. This is the case, because at least he includes as evidence both the 'indisputable facts' about Jesus and the outcome of his life in creating the contextual framework.

It is acknowledged today that the Gospels and the New Testament are themselves a historical witness for Judaism of the first century. Scholars are now using the New Testament to help illumine the diversity of Second Temple Judaism.⁶⁸ Crossan's decision not to allow historical evidence from the Gospels to be a factor in his contextual reconstruction, although allowing other literary evidence, is a weakness. He himself even admits that because the sequence of establishing context before text is a bit artificial there will be some interface between the two: 'It presumes, of course, some general or preliminary text/context basis'.⁶⁹

John P. Meier

J.P. Meier's work, *A Marginal Jew*, amounts to a four-volume library on the study of the historical Jesus. He writes in the introduction that his aim is to provide a 'limited consensus' statement about the historical Jesus that 'would... be open to verification by any and all sincere persons using the means of

66. Allison (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 28, 30-31) criticizes Crossan because his primary tool for determining that a complex did not originate with Jesus is a tradition-history: 'It is quite one thing to observe that a process may have occurred and quite another to establish that it in fact did occur... [C]an we really draw up in any reliable detail, as Crossan has attempted to do, the multitudinous tradition histories that presumably lie behind them [i.e. the Gospels]?'

67. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 13-22.

68. Recently, while in Tübingen, I heard a paper given by Prof. Dr Herman Lichtenberger arguing for a new paradigm in NT scholarship which uses the NT to illuminate early Judaism rather than the converse.

69. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 147.

modern historical research'.⁷⁰ Meier states that the goal of his work 'is a reasonably reliable sketch of the historical Jesus',⁷¹ and its accomplishment is through the painstaking process of 'detecting reliable data' in the sources: 'only a careful examination of the gospel material in the light of the criteria of historicity can hope to yield reliable results'.⁷² Moreover, '*A Marginal Jew* attempts as much as possible to let any overarching interpretation of Jesus and his work emerge gradually and naturally out of the *convergence* of the data judged historical'.⁷³

Presuppositions. Before we consider his procedures for 'detecting reliable data', we will briefly describe his underlying prejudgments. Meier does not provide a detailed discussion of his presuppositions and their impact on his study, although in a footnote in volume two he does describe them as 'general presuppositions of historiography', and not a 'predetermined interpretive grid'.⁷⁴ Hence, for him, as with Crossan, suppositions which are influential in his study of Jesus are not theological or doctrinal, *but historical*.

With respect to the first discernable presupposition, it is clear that he pursues *objectivity* and believes that it should be sought after, although he admits it will never be reached. In practice, objectivity, writes Meier, 'means knowing one's sources, having clear criteria for making historical judgments about them, learning from other questers past and present, and inviting the criticism of one's peers'.⁷⁵ In addition, he wishes to bracket off the church's theological statements about Jesus, which he regards as the result of faith, from a historical study of the life of Jesus: 'in what follows I will do my best to bracket what I hold by faith and examine only what can be shown to be certain or probable by historical research and logical argumentation'.⁷⁶ This quest for objectivity and the separation of history from faith lead him to conclude:

[Although] there is no Switzerland of the mind in the world of Jesus research...the solution is to admit honestly one's own standpoint, to *try* to exclude its influence in making scholarly judgments by adhering to certain commonly held criteria, and to invite the correction of other scholars when one's vigilance inevitably slips.⁷⁷

He acknowledges that he is a Catholic scholar, but he does not think that this *should* or *does* have any bearing on his historical inquiry into Jesus.

70. Meier, *Roots*, p. 5.

71. Meier, *Companions*, p. 9.

72. Meier, *Mentor*, p. 5.

73. Meier, *Mentor*, p. 14 n. 6, emphasis added.

74. Meier, *Mentor*, p. 14 n. 6.

75. Meier, *Roots*, pp. 4-5.

76. Meier, *Roots*, p. 6.

77. Meier, *Roots*, pp. 5-6.

An equally fundamental judgement, which is easily recognizable as a bias, is his belief in the superiority of a *building-block* (i.e. inductive) approach to the work of historical Jesus research. He has a ‘bottom-up’ method which consists of the sifting through of the individual sayings, deeds and motifs bit by bit in order to exhume from the Gospels a moderate amount of fairly certain data on which to build a reconstruction. In Meier’s discussion of John the Baptist and Jesus this conviction is clearly perceived. Meier spends over three hundred pages (including endnotes) considering, with painstaking detail, the authenticity of each tradition that connects these two figures, examining the Synoptic Gospels, John and Acts. In the end, he spends only a page discussing the implications of his study.⁷⁸

A final working assumption that underlies Meier’s project is his traditional approach to the sources for Jesus. The canonical Gospels, according to Meier, are the *primary* source of information, although they are ‘suffused with the Easter faith of the early Church and were written from forty to seventy years after the events narrated’.⁷⁹ For this reason, he is fully committed to the historical-critical method since, to his mind, it is the only means by which one can apprehend the historical Jesus. Thus, he affirms that one can distinguish the distinct layers within the tradition by means of the criteria of authenticity.

Similarly to Crossan, Meier distinguishes three stages of tradition history: what comes from Jesus (Stage I, roughly AD 28–30), what emanated from the oral tradition of the early Church (Stage II, roughly AD 30–70), and what was produced by the editorial work (redaction) of the evangelists (Stage III, roughly AD 70–100).⁸⁰ Additionally, he assumes the traditional two-source hypothesis (with its conclusions of Markan priority, the existence of a Q source, and sources M and L) and he holds to the independence of John, thereby seeing three primary sources (Mark, Q and John) and two minor sources (M and L).⁸¹ Finally, with regard to sources, Meier possesses little confidence in the rabbinic material, the *agrapha*, the apocryphal Gospels, and the Nag Hammadi codices as sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus.⁸²

Procedures. Having described Meier’s presuppositions, we will now more closely investigate his procedure. Meier’s approach begins and is centred on the use of the criteria of authenticity. He distances himself from those approaches that begin with an interpretive grid: *A Marginal Jew* does not intend to impose

78. Meier, *Mentor*, pp. 176–77; see also pp. 509–1038 where Meier spends 529 pages discussing the authenticity of the miracles of Jesus.

79. Meier, *Roots*, p. 167.

80. Meier, *Roots*, p. 167.

81. Meier, *Roots*, p. 44.

82. Meier, *Roots*, p. 140.

on the data any predetermined interpretive grid, be it political, economic, or sociological. Such grids can be useful at a later stage of interpretation, but in the quest for the historical Jesus they neither generate data concerning Jesus nor solve the problem of the data's historicity'.⁸³ Every piece of Jesus tradition—sayings, deeds, and motifs—is put through the sieve of five criteria of authenticity (see Table 2 overleaf) in order to determine the probability of historicity: 'the function of the criteria is to pass from the merely possible to the really probable, to inspect various probabilities, and to decide which candidate is most probable'.⁸⁴ The result is an 'overarching interpretation of Jesus and his work [, which] emerge[s] gradually and naturally out of the *convergence* of the data judged historical'.⁸⁵

In a second step the interpretation of Jesus is then placed within the historical, cultural and social world of first-century Palestinian Judaism.⁸⁶ Meier believes that Jesus must be considered within a 'web of relationships' and within the Jewish context of those relationships. The bottom line for Meier is that Jesus was Jewish and he interacted with other Jewish individuals and groups within the first century.

After all is said and done, the Jesus that results from Meier's procedure is actually a fairly traditional one and would be considered conservative in comparison to many of his contemporaries. Meier's Jesus was: (1) a unique figure in his contemporary setting, because of the convergence of distinct features;⁸⁷ (2) an eschatological prophet, in the manner of Elijah, proclaiming the kingdom of God as both future and present; (3) a teacher and miracle worker; he gathered together a group of twelve disciples who symbolized his mission to all of Israel; and (4) he was not a 'social rebel emerging from a seething cauldron of intolerable social and economic injustice'.⁸⁸

83. Meier, *Mentor*, p. 14 n. 6.

84. Meier, *Roots*, pp. 168-69.

85. Meier, *Mentor*, pp. 14 n. 6, emphasis added.

86. Meier, *Companions*.

87. Meier (*Mentor*, p. 3) writes, 'There were many prophets and teachers in Palestine in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. None of them had the combination of such success, such a disastrous fate, and such a lasting impact as the Nazarene. A key reason for the difference lies in the atypical configuration of Jesus' characteristics, a configuration in which miracles played an important part. Because of his claim to work miracles, a claim accepted by many, Jesus was not just another prophet or teacher. At one and the same time he acted as (1) the prophet of the last days, which were soon to come and yet were somehow already present in his ministry; (2) the gatherer of the Israel of the last days, the twelve tribes of Israel being symbolized by the circle of the twelve disciples Jesus formed around himself; (3) the teacher of both general moral truths and detailed directives concerning the observance of the Mosaic Law (e.g., divorce); and last by not least (4) the exorcist and healer of illnesses who was reputed, like Elijah and Elisha, to have raised the dead'.

88. Meier, *Companions*, p. 619.

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
Criterion of Embarrassment	Pinpoints gospel material that would hardly have been invented by the early church, since such material created embarrassment or theological difficulties for the church even during the NT period (e.g., the baptism of Jesus by John)
Criterion of Discontinuity	Focuses on words or deeds of Jesus that cannot be derived either from the Judaism(s) of Jesus' time or from the early church (e.g., Jesus' rejection of voluntary fasting)
Criterion of Multiple Attestation	Focuses on sayings or deeds of Jesus witnessed in more than one independent literary source (e.g., Mark, Q, Paul, or John) and/or more than on literary form or genre (e.g., a saying of Jesus about a certain type of miracle plus a story about the same type of miracle)
Criterion of Coherence	Brings into play only after a certain amount of historical material has been isolated by other criteria. The criterion of coherence holds that other sayings and deeds of Jesus that fit in well with the preliminary 'data base' established by the other criteria have good chance of being historical
Criterion of Jesus' Rejection and Execution	Instead of judging individual sayings or deeds of Jesus, this criterion looks at the larger pattern of Jesus' ministry and asks what words and deeds fit in with and explain his trial and crucifixion; a Jesus whose words and deeds did not threaten or alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus

Table 2. *Meier's Criteria of Authenticity*⁸⁹

Assessment. Relative to the size of the Meier's project, by some accounts, it makes only a meagre contribution to the field. With respect to both method and conclusions the work does little to stand out. This is not to say, however, that Meier has not provided a significant scholarly study worthy of interaction. In the first place, Meier is uniquely committed to scholarly interaction with his peers. In the introduction to volume two, he defends the reason for extending the work to three volumes—and now four. One of the primary reasons for the length of the project, he suggests, is the critical need for peer review and critique in the

89. Meier, *Roots*, pp. 168-84.

area of historical Jesus research. He writes, ‘in Jesus research, debate is not simply a matter of being a gregarious intellectual who loves a good fight; debate is essential if Jesus research is to remain an honest academic endeavour’.⁹⁰ The amount of detailed discussion and interaction in the endnotes is on the verge of extreme, but it is a very worthy and important aspect to Meier’s procedure. It is in every way a ‘Reference Library’ on the historical Jesus and one can hardly imagine an issue on the subject of Jesus that Meier has not touched.

Second, Meier’s procedure is solid, rigorous and consistent; he follows his method through the whole work with tenacity and has produced a product in which ‘no stone has been left unturned’.⁹¹ In this way, he stands as a model of judicious scholarly work and serves as an example to be emulated.

With due respect to Meier’s scholarly piece of work, it must be pointed out that it possesses significant weaknesses. First, the four weaknesses mentioned in Sanders and Crossan’s work apply equally to Meier: the obsession with consensus,⁹² a classical foundationalist epistemology, a positivistic confidence in his application of tradition criticism, and insistence on separating confessional faith and the pursuit of history. With respect to the application of tradition criticism, interestingly, Crossan criticizes Meier for lacking methodology and applying the criteria of authenticity ad hoc.⁹³ As Crossan sees it, ‘Meier’s criteria are not methodological enough to discriminate accurately between various layers of the tradition’.⁹⁴ Though I do think Meier has a ‘methodology’, albeit unstated, Crossan is correct to point out this weakness. Meier *wishes* to have a ‘text only’ approach which focuses exclusively on the determination of the authenticity of individual traditions apart from *any* frame of reference or context. The reality, however, is that as hard as Meier might try, he cannot escape his *own* context.

90. Meier, *Mentor*, pp. 1-2.

91. This quote is taken from a paper by Robert Yarbrough given in the Synoptic Study group at the 2002 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Yarbrough was reviewing Meier’s work on the Miracles in vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew*.

92. This is uniquely so for Meier who images the result of his work to be a product of what he has labelled an ‘unpapal conclave’. This group, as he images it, is made up of a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew and an agnostic who are all familiar with first-century religious movements. They are locked up in the bowels of the Harvard Divinity School library, fed meagrely and not allowed to emerge until ‘they have hammered out a *consensus* document on Jesus of Nazareth... An essential requirement of this document would be that it be based on purely historical sources and arguments. Its conclusions would have to be open to verification by any and all sincere persons using the means of modern historical research’ (*Mentor*, p. 5, emphasis added). Meier is looking to produce what he calls a ‘limited consensus’ statement about the historical Jesus—by this he means a statement that ‘all reasonable people’ would agree on about the historical Jesus (*Roots*, p. 2).

93. Crossan, *Birth*, pp. 143-46.

94. Crossan, *Birth*, p. 146.

And the context that informs this application of criteria is the context of modern scholarly ‘consensus’.⁹⁵

A second criticism of his work, which points more broadly to a problem in the field of Jesus studies, is his answer to *the problem of subjectivity*. Meier, as is true of most scholars engaged in the study of the historical Jesus, acknowledges that complete objectivity is *not* possible. Having recognized this reality, Meier contends that one must acknowledge his or her vantage point and admit it openly. Moreover, he believes this subjectivity can be overcome, at least partially, ‘by the honest admittance of one’s own standpoint and the attempt to exclude its influence in making scholarly judgments by adhering to certain commonly held criteria and inviting the correction of other scholars’.⁹⁶ While these precautionary steps seem, at first glance, to be moving in the right direction, they belie an unrealistic perspective on humanity. It is simply not enough to merely acknowledge one’s vantage point and then go on and conduct scholarly work objectively. There is no way around some subjectivity at every step in an investigation, and the persuasive power of our own vantage point is not overcome by merely having peers point to places where they disagree. Although some will no doubt disagree, I believe that many scholars have not fully conceded the pervasiveness and power of their subjectivity. And as a result they have attempted to free themselves from it—looking on it as a curse and liability—rather than seeking to incorporate it productively into their procedure. What if the subjectivity was of value to the one looking at Jesus, not a curse?

N.T. Wright

In the first two volumes of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, which is a proposed five-volume series, N.T. Wright has outlined both a comprehensive methodology and set forth specific methods for the study of the historical Jesus. In fact, the whole of the first volume, entitled *The New Testament and the People of God*,⁹⁷ is dedicated to the introductory issues of methodology that will guide his whole project. Volume two, entitled *Jesus and the Victory of God*,⁹⁸ is an extensive study of the aims and beliefs of Jesus with nearly one hundred and fifty pages of introductory material where he clearly describes the methods he used in his study of Jesus.

Presuppositions. Wright has several very important presuppositions that exercise control over his study. First, in a chapter called ‘Knowledge: Problems and Varieties’, Wright argues for a critical realism epistemology, which he defines as:

95. Cf. note 92 above.

96. Meier, *Roots*, p. 6.

97. Wright, *New Testament*.

98. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

A way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence 'realism') while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical')... Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is *never* itself independent of the knower.⁹⁹

The significance of this epistemological stance is the conviction that the knowledge of *particulars* takes place within a worldview or framework of interpretation. Wright contends,

Instead of working from the particulars of observation, or 'sense-data', to confident statements about the external reality, positivistically conceived, critical realism sees knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer's way of being in relation to the world... Instead of working as it were upwards from empirical data... knowledge takes place when people *find things that fit* with the particular story or stories to which they are accustomed to give allegiance.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, Wright argues, the particulars, or 'facts' and 'objects', are also story-laden: they come with their own theories attached to them. This is due to the 'events' nature of the world in which we know 'facts' and 'objects' by our experience of them in an event. Wright uses the illustration of the word and object of a 'cup' to show that we don't know it purely by physical properties, but with the word or object comes 'implicit stories... , whether they concern pottery class, a family tradition, a tea-party, or the borrowing of sugar from a neighbour'.¹⁰¹ The decision as to what is true, however, does not end with this subjectivity. Rather, the process of *verification* tests the truth of the knowledge. After I acquire facts and absorb them into my worldview, I then offer a story or hypothesis that I believe explains the facts.¹⁰² This story can be judged as to its truthfulness by its ability to fit in all the evidence, to be clear and simple, and to convincingly explain data in other related areas.

Beyond Wright's distinctive epistemological supposition, another foundational belief he brings to bear on his study of Jesus is related to the ancient sources for Jesus. For Wright, as was true of Sanders and Meier, the canonical Gospels are the primary source of information on Jesus. The scriptural index in *Jesus and the Victory of God* suggests that he relies mainly on the Synoptics, makes relatively minor use of John's Gospel, and some use of the other New

99. Wright, *New Testament*, p. 35, emphasis his; a 'critical realist' approach toward the study of Jesus was first articulated by Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

100. Wright, *New Testament*, p. 37, emphasis his.

101. Wright, *New Testament*, p. 43.

102. Wright, *New Testament*, p. 37, emphasis his.

Testament books. In addition, the apocryphal works and other non-canonical early Christian writings are inconsequential for Wright's work. In *Jesus and the Victory of God* he does not spell out his views on the Synoptic Problem, but in a later article in response to Crossan he states,

My working hypothesis is that Luke used Mark (though I know some argue opposite), and I actually think it is fairly likely that Matthew used Mark (though some oppose that, too). But, after twenty-five years of study and teaching, I am, as a historian, nowhere near as convinced about these points, still less about all that has been built around them, as I am that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish eschatological prophet...¹⁰³

Several other source presuppositions can be mentioned. First, he believes the genre of the Gospels is a combination of Jewish history and Hellenistic biography; in this way, the Gospels are—at one and the same time—the story of Jesus of Nazareth and the story of the climax of the history of Israel.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Wright's procedure for studying the Gospels moves from general to particular; he moves from larger scale stories (i.e. Gospels) to smaller stories (forms).¹⁰⁵ Regarding forms, Wright offers a novel form-critical approach that emphasizes the Jewish nature of the earliest stories about Jesus. In doing so, he understands the historical development of the forms to go in the opposite direction from the traditional form-critical approaches: moving from early Jewish forms to later Hellenistic forms.¹⁰⁶ In a fourth presupposition about the Gospels he contends that the Gospels may not be as interrelated as is often assumed due to the effect of 'informal, but controlled' oral tradition and the itinerant nature of Jesus' ministry.¹⁰⁷ Finally, Wright believes that Q and *Thomas* are only minimally helpful for historical Jesus research and no account is taken of the other non-canonical sources.¹⁰⁸

Procedures. We have already alluded to Wright's procedure in our discussion on critical realism; it consists of a two-step process of hypothesis and verification:

The task before the serious historian of Jesus is *not* in the first instance conceived as the reconstruction of traditions about Jesus, according to their place within the history of the early church, but the *advancement* of serious historical hypotheses—that is, the telling of large-scale narratives—about Jesus himself, and the examination of the

103. N.T. Wright, 'Doing Justice to Jesus: A Response to J. D. Crossan: "What Victory? What God?"', *SJT* 50 (1997), pp. 359-79 (364).

104. Wright, *New Testament*, pp. 381-82.

105. Wright, *New Testament*, p. 371.

106. Wright, *New Testament*, pp. 418-35.

107. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 133-37; Wright depends on the work of K.E. Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *AJT* 5 (1991), pp. 34-54; see also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 205-10.

108. Wright, *New Testament*, pp. 435-43.

prima facie relevant data to see how they fit... the object of the exercise is to produce a *coherent synthesis* which functions as a hypothesis and must be treated as such.¹⁰⁹

The first step is the formulation of a hypothesis about the person of Jesus. The hypothesis will employ three kinds of information: (1) first-century Palestinian Judaism; (2) early Christianity as the effective history of Jesus; and (3) Jesus' aims and beliefs. The kind of hypothesis Wright is suggesting implies *prior* hypotheses (or frames of reference) about Judaism and early Christianity. It implies that the kind of aims and beliefs Wright is looking for in Jesus are ones which fit a person standing between these poles: 'Like a great pincer movement, therefore, we can work inwards towards Jesus, from the Jewish context of his own work and from the Christian theology of the early church'.¹¹⁰ For Wright, the two knowns (i.e., the history of Second Temple Judaism and the effective history of Jesus = early Christianity) help to illumine the unknown (i.e. Jesus). Within this framework the individual traditions in the Gospels, such as the parable of the Prodigal Son, are judged by a reworked criterion of authenticity. Wright takes over the traditional criterion of dissimilarity and revises it, now labelling it the *criterion of double dissimilarity and similarity*. He states the criterion this way: 'when something can be seen to be credible (though perhaps deeply subversive) within first-century Judaism, and credible as the implied starting-point (though not the exact replica) of something in later Christianity, there is a strong possibility of our being in touch with the genuine history of Jesus'.¹¹¹

Wright seeks to discern Jesus' mindset-within-worldview in order to discover his aims and beliefs.¹¹² A worldview is a perspective of a society made up of four features: characteristic stories, fundamental symbols, habitual praxis, and a set of questions and answers (who are we? where are we? what's wrong? what's the solution? and what time is it?).¹¹³ A mindset is a worldview as held by a particular person. The distinctive quality of a worldview and mindset is that they cannot be explained in terms of anything else: 'if challenged a worldview generates the answer "that's just the way things are", and a mindset replies to critics with "that's just the sort of person I am"'.¹¹⁴ Worldviews and mindsets generate

109. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 88, emphasis added. Cf. also Wright, *New Testament*, pp. 98-109.

110. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 128.

111. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 132.

112. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 137-44. Cf. also Wright (*New Testament*, pp. 121-44)—here, Wright develops a plan whereby one could study the worldview of a particular society and mindset of a particular individual. He then spends the rest of the book studying the worldviews of first-century Judaism and Christianity. From the study of the literature he is able to discover the mindsets of some within both those groups.

113. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 138.

114. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 138.

a set of ‘basic beliefs’ and ‘aims’ that in turn reach day-to-day expression in what Wright has called ‘consequent beliefs’ and ‘intentions’.¹¹⁵ Hence, there is a relationship between a person’s mindset-within-worldview and their beliefs and aims. It is possible then, to grasp the aims and beliefs of a person by discovering their mindset. The mindset of a person, further, can be grasped by the initial examination of their *actions*. The study of Jesus’ historically secure actions can lead to the discovery of his core beliefs and intentions.¹¹⁶

Armed with the three pieces of information—first-century Judaism, early Christianity and Jesus’ aims and beliefs—a hypothesis can be offered. Wright’s hypothesis offers a Jesus who: (1) ‘was a Jewish eschatological prophet who believed that the climax of Israel’s history was occurring in and through him, his work, and his approaching fate’; (2) thought of himself as Messiah; (3) believed it was his vocation to die vicariously for Israel and the world; and (4) believed himself to be the embodiment of Israel’s God.¹¹⁷

The verification of this hypothesis about Jesus is the next step in the process. According to Wright, a good hypothesis about Jesus includes all the relevant data, provides a simple and coherent overall picture, and proves fruitful in other related areas.¹¹⁸ What is more, it answers the *main* historical question:

How do we account for the fact that, by AD 110, there was a large and vigorous international movement, already showing considerable diversity, whose founding myth (in a quite ‘neutral’ sense) was a story about Jesus of Nazareth, a figure of the recent past?¹¹⁹

Assessment. Though it is clear from our discussion that Wright’s overall procedural approach is not novel, as it seems he is especially indebted to Meyer and Sanders, Wright contributes significantly to historical Jesus methodology and methods. First, his description and defence of his epistemological stance (i.e., critical realism) is the most comprehensive among historical Jesus scholars and it provides a needed alternative to the excessively positivistic approaches of the likes of Sanders, Crossan and Meier, just to name a few.

Second, Wright further develops the hypothesis-verification approach initiated by Sanders. His appeal for a top-down framework combined with the mindset-within-worldview analysis is an alternative to the building block procedure of Meier. Wright’s attempt to revise the criterion of dissimilarity into the *criterion of double dissimilarity and similarity* is a further distinctive contribution of his

115. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 138.

116. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 142.

117. Points 2–4 were taken from Craig Blomberg, ‘The Wright Stuff: A Critical Overview of *Jesus and the Victory of God*’, in Carey C. Newman (ed.), *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 19–39 (35).

118. Wright, *New Testament*, pp. 99–100.

119. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 99.

work. His outlook on the Gospels as stories and the consequent decision to move from the general-to-particular in handling the Gospels (i.e. movement from large story to smaller stories) sets him out among his contemporaries.

Finally, his candid treatment of the Synoptic Problem and the decision to suspend judgment on the issue seeing the question of the interrelationship of the Gospels and the historical Jesus as inseparable is an understandable and distinctive outlook.

Although Wright's presuppositions and procedures have provided an alternative to the minimalistic approaches of scholars such as Crossan, Meier and even Sanders, there are particular weaknesses that have received criticism. First, Wright possesses two of the weaknesses that we have noticed with other scholars, though possibly to a lesser degree: a quest for consensus and the insistence on the separation of confessional faith from historical inquiry.¹²⁰ This divorce can be seen in at least two ways. First of all, Wright has been criticized for not following through on his own epistemological convictions. C.S. Evans has critiqued Wright for, although building up a sophisticated epistemological façade, continuing the practice of 'methodological naturalism'.¹²¹

He argues that Wright's reliance on methodological naturalism can be seen in his treatment of miracles, prophetic insight and Jesus' self-awareness.¹²² It is not possible to describe Evans's argument in any detail here, but, with respect to miracles, Evans observes that Wright's stance is much like Meier's. According to Evans, Meier, though not committed to *metaphysical* naturalism, maintains a *methodological* naturalism because Meier's view is that historians can neither affirm nor deny the reality of miracles. All a historian can do is to attempt to discern whether a person's contemporaries believed that the person performed miracles. This neutral stance, however, in practice leads the historian to avoid interpretations or explanations of events that attribute a result to divine activity. He writes, 'any actual explanations must, therefore, be natural ones'.¹²³ Evans then shows at numerous points Wright's views are in line with this viewpoint: (1) Wright 'naturalizes' the signs Jesus is alleged to have performed by moving

120. Cf. Green ('Quest', p. 555) where he critiques Wright, and others, for their conviction that a proper concept of 'Christ' is protected only by a pursuit of the 'real human Jesus' in history.

121. See Evans ('Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship', in Carey C. Newman [ed.], *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999], pp. 180-205 [183]), who characterizes 'methodological naturalism' as a historical perspective articulated around the beginning of the twentieth century by thinkers such as E. Troeltsch and recently defended by V.A. Harvey. The perspective is based on three principles: the principle of criticism, the principle of analogy and the principle of correlation.

122. Evans, 'Methodological Naturalism', pp. 188-96.

123. Evans, 'Methodological Naturalism', p. 190.

them from the category of ‘special divine authority or power’ to actions performed by ‘many people’; (2) Wright classifies the mighty works of Jesus as a form of magic; and (3) Wright at several points in his discussion appeals to a ‘consensus’ among historians.

What is more, the claim Wright makes for his results differs little from those of the positive foundationalist, who claims to ‘tell it like it really was’.¹²⁴ In this way, Wright’s presentation resembles an attempt to describe the contours of a *de-confessionized*, ‘real human’ Jesus of Nazareth. He seems to speak with a ‘purely neutral, value-free “scientific” voice, which is the bedrock of the Enlightenment epistemology he earnestly wishes to debunk.’¹²⁵

A second critique of Wright’s work is related to his procedures. He has been criticized for not adequately acknowledging and wrestling with the distinctive contributions the Gospel writers make to the picture of Jesus. L.T. Johnson is perhaps correct to criticize Wright for ignoring the difficulties that the Gospels’ unique versions or forms of the ‘story’ present for historical reconstruction, writing that ‘if Wright wants to avoid the deconstructive path of the New Questers and work with the New Testament compositions as stories, then he must deal with each of their stories in all its specificity, *before* seeing how some historical script might underlie them’.¹²⁶ Wright will eventually publish a monograph on the Gospels and it may be here that this concern is addressed.

Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter

Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter’s contribution to the study of the historical Jesus, *Der Kriterienfrage in Der Jesusforschung. Vom Differenzkriterium Zum Plausibilitätskriterium*,¹²⁷ has been in print for several years, but has recently become available in an English translation: *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* (see note 5).

Presuppositions. Although it is the last chapter in *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus*,¹²⁸ it is the presuppositional basis for Theissen and Winter’s whole project. The chapter is titled ‘Criteria in Jesus Research and the “Wide Ugly

124. I am indebted to Markus Bockmuehl for this insight. He suggested it to me in an earlier draft of the paper.

125. Cf. Padgett, ‘Advice’, p. 287.

126. Luke Timothy Johnson, ‘A Historiographical Response to Wright’s Jesus’, in Carey C. Newman (ed.), *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 206-24 (217).

127. Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *Der Kriterienfrage in Der Jesusforschung. Vom Differenzkriterium Zum Plausibilitätskriterium* (Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus, 34; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1997).

128. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, pp. 226-59.

Ditch” of History¹²⁹ and it offers a theoretical basis for the study of the historical Jesus I would call *dialectical scepticism*. Theissen raises the very important question of the relationship between history and faith. He acknowledges that convictions of modern historical science stand in tension with the certainty of religious faith. He writes, ‘Faith is unconditional certainty, a courage to live and die that rests on the person of Jesus and is formed by this person. But everything we know about Jesus is *mediated* to us by historical sources, whose interpretation is uncertain and will always be uncertain’.¹³⁰ Succinctly stated, the question is, ‘How can conditional historical knowledge provide the basis for an unconditional certainty?’¹³¹

In answering this question, Theissen begins by noting that personal certainty arises from the joining together of axiomatic beliefs and accidental sources. By axiomatic beliefs he means ‘all those statements that one sees no obligation to ground but that rather serve as the basis for other statements’.¹³² In modern historical scholarship these include the premises of the fallibility of all historical sources (i.e., historical scepticism), the relativity of all historical phenomena (i.e., historical relativism), and the strangeness of everything historical (i.e., historical distance). Not willing to abandon these premises, Theissen answers the question of personal certainty by pointing to the unrecognized ‘internal dialectic’ resident within them: ‘if one thinks them through consistently, they also contain the opposite of their own claim; they thus open up the possibility of a self-limitation’.¹³³

The *dialectic of historical scepticism*, Theissen argues, is human fallibility which not only insures incoherencies, but also coherencies and finds its appropriate expression in the criterion of ‘the plausibility of effects’ (see below).¹³⁴ The *dialectic of historical relativism* is the historical connectedness of Jesus which insures contextual connection and contextual distinction and comes to expression in the criterion of contextual plausibility (see below).¹³⁵ And finally, the *dialectic of historical distance* is the independence of history which leads to the constant pursuit of methodology that disentangles us from our own prejudices.¹³⁶ Consequently, the answer to the problem, which Lessing posed some two hundred years ago, is to jump into the ditch and begin swimming across:

129. This chapter was first published by Theissen as ‘Historical Skepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research or My Attempt to Leap Across Lessing’s Yawning Gulf’ (cf. Theissen, ‘Historical Scepticism’).

130. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 227, emphasis added.

131. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 227.

132. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 230.

133. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, pp. 230-31.

134. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 231.

135. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 232.

136. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 232.

acknowledge the axioms of historical criticism, but move beyond them through the internal dialectic. The result is that by means of historical plausibility criteria, one can be moving toward certainty in our knowledge of the historical events surrounding Jesus' life and work, though such knowledge can only be hypothetical.

Three additional assumptions serve as a basis for the procedures Theissen and Winter use. A brief mention of them will follow. First, they believe a comprehensive picture of Jesus formed *prior* to the detailed evaluation of data is both *inexorable*—in that it is formed 'in part from the sources, in part from the history of research, in part from prescholarly engagement with the Christian tradition'¹³⁷ and *necessary*—in that they act as a *regulatory* influence on the judgments about authenticity of individual traditions.

Second, they argue for the *double demand of intellectual falsification*, which refers to the need for falsification at both the level of the comprehensive picture of Jesus and of concrete individual traditions:

No experiment, experiment report, observation statement or well-corroborated low-level falsifying hypothesis alone can lead to falsification. There is no falsification before the emergence of a better theory... Thus historical research is not faced with the simple alternative 'authentic' or 'inauthentic,' but with the question of how the extant tradition may receive the most satisfactory historical explanation, whether this is by tracing it back to Jesus or explaining it from some other historical context.¹³⁸

Third, Theissen presupposes that the canonical Gospels are the primary source of information on Jesus. He writes, 'the texts of the New Testament... are part of the history of Jesus' own effects, and thereby point back to the historical Jesus'.¹³⁹ The two factors that are important in the study of the sources, argues Theissen, are their historical proximity to the historical Jesus and their independence; that is, the sources that bring us closest to the historical Jesus are the most important and, since we can never test our sources by direct comparison to historical reality, the comparison with other independent sources is important for determining historical proximity.¹⁴⁰ Also, he believes the non-canonical sources are to be given equal footing with the canonical Gospels in the study of the historical Jesus, but none is older than Mark and the Synoptic Gospels 'seem historically more reliable'.¹⁴¹ Finally, with respect to sources, Theissen presupposes the two-source hypothesis along with the independent Matthaean and Lukan material. For him, Q is 'the most important source for reconstructing the

137. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 212, emphasis added.

138. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 204, emphasis added.

139. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 208.

140. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 17-18.

141. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 61.

teaching of Jesus’, but it is difficult to reconstruct with certainty¹⁴² and the *Gospel of Thomas* preserves *some* independent and old traditions.

Procedures. With these presuppositions outlined, we will now consider Theissen and Winter’s *criterion of historical plausibility*. This procedure is similar to Wright’s hypothesis and verification method since they, like Wright, seek to build a hypothesis that fits Jesus plausibly in both first-century Judaism and early Christianity. The criterion of historical plausibility states that the material which ‘helps explain the influence of Jesus and at the same time can only have come into being in a Jewish context is historical...’¹⁴³ There is both a *narrow* and *broad* application of this criterion. Narrowly applied, this criterion is used to determine the authenticity of individual Jesus traditions. When broadly applied, it is also used as a test of the comprehensive picture of Jesus. The application of the criteria in the details of the tradition is conducted against the background of the broad, comprehensive picture of Jesus. This comprehensive picture is not a ‘supplementary’ criterion but a ‘regulative concept effective in all the criteria, source-evaluation arguments, and indicators of distinctiveness’.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the hypothesis about Jesus will be verified and corrected through ‘the hermeneutical circle between the plausibility of a comprehensive picture of Jesus and the plausibility of evaluations about the details of his ministry and message’.¹⁴⁵

The overarching criterion is divided into two additional criteria (i.e., the criteria of impact plausibility and contextual plausibility). These criteria are then further subdivided into four more sub-criteria—two under each criterion (impact plausibility = the criterion of coherence of sources and the opposition to tradition bias; contextual plausibility = the criterion of contextual coherence and contextual individuality).

<i>Main Criteria</i>	<i>Sub-criteria</i>
The Criterion of Impact Plausibility	(1) The Criterion of Coherence of Sources (2) The Criterion of the Opposition of Tradition Bias
The Criterion of Contextual Plausibility	(1) The Criterion of Contextual Correspondence (2) The Criterion of Contextual Individuality

Table 3. *Theissen and Winter’s Historical Plausibility Criterion*

The first measure under the criterion of historical plausibility is called *Impact Plausibility*. This criterion places the focus of study on the influence of Jesus in

142. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 29.

143. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 116.

144. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 212.

145. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 201.

the extant sources. This category is concerned with the traditions that reflect the influence of Jesus in the sources despite their incoherencies (i.e. disagreements). It correlates to the answer Theissen provided for the problem of historical scepticism: human fallibility ensures that some (and this may be a large amount) of the effects of Jesus remain in the traditions. The category is concerned with the effect Jesus exercised on the *shape* of the sources:

Jesus traditions have a historically plausible influence when they can be explained as the influence of the life of Jesus—partly because independent sources correspond, and partly because elements in these sources go against the tendency. *Coherence* and *opposition* to the [redactional] tendency are complementary criteria for plausibility of historical influence.¹⁴⁶

The coherence in the traditions is measured by the *criterion of source coherence*: similar traditions that appear in independent sources are deemed historical. This criterion can be applied, in the first instance, to the so-called ‘cross-section evidence’.¹⁴⁷ This term refers to the recurring *topoi*, forms and elements of content in different streams of the tradition. These are clearly visible when, in spite of competing interests and themes, persistent characteristics of Jesus are repeated in several sources: ‘Thus, whenever we find agreements in Matthew and Luke’s special material, in the Sayings Source, and in Mark, John, and the *Gospel of Thomas*, they probably have roots in the history of Jesus himself’.¹⁴⁸ The criterion can also be applied to ‘*elements that remain constant in various genres*’:¹⁴⁹ those that are from different genres and forms contain comparable and mutually coherent elements, which can be historical or authentic.

The opposition to the redactional tendencies in the traditions is measured by a second criterion, *the criterion of opposition to tradition bias (resistance to tendencies of the tradition)*: traditions that are different in nature than the general direction of the source may be historical. This criterion results from the view that the opposition to the tendency of a particular tradition could be the mark of ‘remnants’ of the historical Jesus; source-critical scholars have used this argument for decades. The criterion is an attempt to get at the ‘unintentional evidence that is not influenced by the tendency of the source by observing places where there is tension or even contradiction’.¹⁵⁰ Hence, it is a revised form of the traditional criterion of dissimilarity in its positive form and in its application *only* to the early church.

There are, however, a few obvious problems with this criterion that weaken its usefulness. The first is the possibility that the tension or contradiction is

146. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 116, emphasis added.

147. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 236.

148. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 236.

149. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 237, emphasis theirs.

150. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 174.

merely a relic of an earlier phase in the history of church and, thus, not from Jesus. Or, if one holds to the internal plurality of the early church with its consequent diverse streams of Jesus tradition, a contradiction or tension could be simply the residue of one of these other streams of tradition and not a remnant of the effects of Jesus. Finally, it is also possible that the diversity found in the tradition comes from Jesus' own setting. In an attempt to address these problems, Theissen and Winter suggest that this criterion must be supplemented with two additional tests: (1) the investigation of its tradition history up to its reception in a written source, and (2) a comparison of Jesus materials that have a related content in other strands of the tradition (i.e., the criterion of coherence of sources).¹⁵¹ How much these additional criteria actually allow one to sidestep the potential problems is still a question.

All the results attained by means of impact plausibility can be further examined with regard to their *Contextual Plausibility*. This category provides a way forward through the problem of historical relativity: the interdependence of Jesus within history insures contextual connection and distinction. Like impact plausibility, contextual plausibility investigates points of coherence and incoherence, but, instead of within the sources, now in the historical context:

Traditions of Jesus have plausible historical context when they fit into the Jewish context of the activity of Jesus and are recognizable as individual phenomena within this context. *Contextual correspondence* and *contextual individuality* are complementary criteria for the plausibility of the historical context.¹⁵²

The *criterion of contextual correspondence (appropriateness)* seeks to determine whether or not evidence about Jesus contained within traditions fits into the context of Judaism. The criterion says that those traditions that fit comfortably within Judaism are most likely historical: 'the better a tradition fits into the concrete Jewish context of Palestine and Galilee, the more claim it has to authenticity'.¹⁵³ This turns the criterion of dissimilarity, when applied to Judaism, on its head. Yet, Theissen and Winter argue that it is a historical dictum that 'every historical figure is to be understood fundamentally within the context of his or her world. Anything else would be an unhistorical procedure'.¹⁵⁴ Thus, only those traditions that derive from the context of first-century Judaism can be authentic. Obviously, an appropriate and full knowledge of Judaism is fundamental for this criterion to function and the gains in this area in the last half-century have been substantial and influential. With our growing knowledge of Judaism, a further, and most important, implication of this contextual correspondence can be stated: 'The more an image of Jesus can be made understandable on the basis of its

151. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 175.

152. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 117, emphasis added.

153. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 180.

154. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 182.

Jewish context as a product of Jewish history, the less we can assume it to be the product of early Christian history and imagination'.¹⁵⁵

Contextual correspondence, to be sure, is not complete without the second aspect of the criterion of historical plausibility: the *criterion of contextual individuality (distinctiveness)*. This criterion—acting as a balancing weight to the first—seeks to determine whether the evidence about Jesus points to a particular individual within the Jewish context.

This must be contrasted with the traditional formulation of the criterion of dissimilarity, which 'attempted to find elements of the tradition that were underivable and without analogy'.¹⁵⁶ Theissen and Winter, on the other hand, are 'looking for distinctive individual traits of Jesus within the framework of the Judaism of his own time—not for singular elements that transcend any historical context'.¹⁵⁷ The individual-within-context study is conducted along three lines: (1) constructing a comparable profile, which means comparing Jesus with other charismatic figures and groups within his environment (e.g., the Teacher of Righteousness, Judas the Galilean, and John the Baptist; and Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes); (2) searching for evidence of distinctive features in Jesus (e.g., his unique expressions like *amen*); and (3) establishing individual complexity, which means combining the distinctive marks and particular Jesus traditions to form a complex individual derived from contextual elements.

These two criteria, the history-of-effects and contextual plausibility, work in tandem to create a comprehensive historical plausibility. It is not until both sides of the criteria are taken into account that a picture of Jesus can be constructed. Theissen has outlined the resulting picture of Jesus when he follows his method to its conclusion. Jesus, according to Theissen, was: (1) an itinerant Jewish charismatic; (2) a man who possessed a messianic consciousness; (3) the leader of a Jewish prophetic renewal movement in line with John the Baptist; and (4) a prophet who possessed an *evolutionary* eschatology by which is meant the ministry of Jesus inaugurated the transition from biological to cultural evolution.¹⁵⁸

Assessment. Theissen and Winter have made at least four significant contributions to the presuppositions and procedures in the study of the historical Jesus. First, by convincingly turning the criterion of dissimilarity on its head, they have reaffirmed the importance of placing Jesus plausibly within his first-century Jewish context. Second, the top-down/bottom-up procedural framework in which they move between a 'working picture' of Jesus and the detail of the sources is a

155. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 183.

156. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 184.

157. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, p. 185.

158. Gerd Theissen, *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1985), Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 569-72.

major advance in the study of Jesus. Third, the theoretical basis for a personal certainty in dialectical scepticism is helpful, at least in its observation of the internal dialectic intrinsic to the axioms of New Testament research. Finally, the procedural sophistication and realism of historical plausibility, which acknowledges the innate subjectivity of the researcher and the relative nature of the data (both the sayings and the deeds), stresses the importance of a prior interpretive framework, and does not sacrifice procedural rigor, is a solid alternative to other approaches.

To be honest, I find it difficult to offer much by way of criticism of the work of Theissen and Winter as it represents progress beyond the approaches of Sanders, Crossan, Meier and Wright. It is true, however, that they possess at least two of the weaknesses we have seen in previous approaches, namely, they maintain both a, albeit revised, classical foundationalist epistemological presupposition, and a confidence in the tradition criticism assumption of separating the layers of tradition into their constituent parts. Additionally, their historical plausibility criterion is helpful only as far as it goes. It takes one back only to the period immediately before the sources were composed. Thus, when we use the criterion, all we really have gained is an understanding of Jesus that dates to an early, primarily Jewish, stage of the tradition. It does not necessarily take us back to the Jesus of Nazareth.

Dale C. Allison

D.C. Allison in his volume titled *Jesus of Nazareth* makes a significant contribution to the study of the historical Jesus, although his methods and results generally resemble Sanders's. The first third of the book is dedicated to the question of methods and methodology.

Presuppositions. Allison, while not using the term, holds a form of Wright's critical realism. He rejects the positivistic objectivism of Crossan and others because he sees no way around the subjectivity of the observer:

Certainly we will never be able to program a computer with perfected criteria of authenticity, run the Jesus tradition through it, and learn what Jesus did and did not say. There is *no* foreseeable victory over uncertainty and no way around subjectivity. 'Persistently personal judgements have to be made about the nature of the Gospel material'.¹⁵⁹

Hence, it seems Allison has more scepticism of interpreters of the Jesus tradition than of the tradition itself. This is due to his firm conviction that interpreters cannot be objective in their study: everyone comes to the study of Jesus with preconceived notions and expectations and to say otherwise is to be disingenuous. In fact, he goes so far as to say, 'Our goal is not to be free of prejudices, but to

159. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 35.

have the right prejudices'.¹⁶⁰ Thus, Allison, like Wright, argues for the need to be self-critical in our historical judgments and acknowledge their contingency. On the other hand, Allison does think that something objective can be said about Jesus. He believes that the historical Jesus can be fruitfully studied and that the task of the historian is to construct stories about Jesus that can compete for the best explanation:

As historians of Jesus tradition we are storytellers. We can do no more than aspire to fashion a narrative that is more persuasive than competing narratives, one that satisfies our aesthetic and historical sensibilities because of its apparent ability to clarify more data in a more satisfactory fashion than its rivals.¹⁶¹

In addition, Allison is convinced that historical investigation of Jesus must move from the *general* to the *particular* because it is nearly impossible to *cleanly* separate the contributions of Jesus and the later tradition, since they are inextricably intertwined.¹⁶² He calls into question the approach that moves the other way. If the Gospels are not trustworthy at the level of generality, then the individual traditions cannot be judged as to whether or not they came from Jesus. Said another way, there must be enough truthful information contained in the Gospels that goes back to Jesus that we might know enough about Jesus to determine what might not be original to him. If we only possess a handful of things Jesus said and did, then we are in no position to make determinations about what did or did not come from Jesus.¹⁶³

Allison appeals to an observation about human memories to further clarify his point. He comments that human memories are such that what is remembered by someone is most often of a general nature, while the particulars are forgotten. Because this is generally true, he believes it ridiculous to think that the gospel writers had many exact details about Jesus correct, but their general impressions about him were wrong. So, argues Allison, what is most historical about Jesus is most probably at the general level of motifs, themes and rhetorical strategies.

This line of thought leads Allison to take an all-or-nothing stand on the Jesus tradition. It is *either* truthful in its general impressions of Jesus, and, therefore, reliable as a source of information; *or* it is not, and, therefore, unreliable as a source of information. This is not to say that all that is in the Jesus tradition is truthful, but only to say that the general contours are truthful enough to provide a basis for deciding what is not. Allison contends:

If the tradents of the Jesus tradition got the big picture or the larger patterns wrong then they almost certainly also got the details—that is, the sentences—wrong. It is precarious to urge that we can find the truth about Jesus on the basis of a few dozen

160. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 39.

161. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 35-36.

162. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 33.

163. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 34.

sayings deemed to be authentic if those sayings are interpreted contrary to the general impressions conveyed by the early tradition in its entirety.¹⁶⁴

Thus, he opts for what he acknowledges could be called a ‘naïve or pre-critical’ working hypothesis that the Gospels are, in fact, truthful in their general description of Jesus.¹⁶⁵ He readily admits that this position, while not groundless, is neither the result of an irrefutable argument nor is it vindicated by a few observations: ‘It is rather informed guesswork, a postulate with which to work... [I]ts claim to truthfulness lies in its explanatory power as time goes on and it is applied to ever enlarging arrays of texts and observations’.¹⁶⁶ What is more, Allison insists that this is just the nature of historical Jesus research and to claim any more is naïve. Jesus research is a different species of inquiry than scientific research because there is no way to fashion a trial experiment that allows predictions to be concretely falsified. For Jesus research, the issue is whether one *story* is better than the other. The dispute is settled not by experiments and proofs (criteria of authenticity), but by the offering of reasons for one’s position that are better than the reasons of another.

Two other important presuppositions need to be mentioned. First, Allison is convinced that the place to begin a study of Jesus is first by establishing a story or a frame of reference in which the data taken from the traditions can be placed into coherent patterns. He maintains that ‘our first move is not to discover which sayings or even what complexes are authentic. Rather, we should be looking for something akin to what Thomas Kuhn once called a “paradigm,” an explanatory model or matrix by which to order our data. The initial task is to create a context, a primary frame of reference, for the Jesus tradition, a context that may assist us in determining both the authenticity of traditions and their interpretation’.¹⁶⁷ More will be said about the process of building a frame of reference when we discuss Allison’s procedures. Second, Allison believes that the canonical Gospels are the primary source of information on Jesus. He takes the traditional view of Markan priority, the existence of Q, and the special material for both Matthew (M) and Luke (L).¹⁶⁸ He does not think the extracanonical Gospels, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, make much of a difference in the picture of Jesus. Even when a methodology like Crossan’s gives pride of place to non-canonical sources, the picture of Jesus remains quite a synoptic one. Allison notes that ‘if one carefully

164. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 45.

165. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 50.

166. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 51.

167. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 36.

168. Cf. Dale C. Allison, *The Jesus Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ed. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield and G.N. Stanton; ICC, 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp. 97-127.

scrutinizes where he [i.e. Crossan] puts the + signs in his data base, it becomes apparent that, when all is said and done, he has a mostly Synoptic Jesus'.¹⁶⁹

Procedures. Allison's predisposition has led him to adopt a hypothesis and verification approach to reconstructing the historical Jesus. His procedure follows four steps. He begins with establishing a primary frame of reference. This interpretive framework is gained from the general 'indisputable facts' spread across the New Testament and is formed independently of any evaluation of the historicity of individual items in the Jesus tradition. The facts clearly point to the conclusion that Jesus was an eschatological prophet.¹⁷⁰ The next step is a search for biographical facts that are *all but universally agreed upon*¹⁷¹ as well as the major motifs and themes and rhetorical strategies that appear repeatedly in the traditions. This list of themes and rhetorical strategies is drawn from the broad features of the tradition that are spread over diverse sources.¹⁷² The third step is an evaluation of the historicity of the complexes by means of a refined set of criteria of authenticity, which he prefers to call indices. The indices, Allison reminds his readers, cannot be used in isolation, but must function under the canopy of the prior decisions made about the frame of reference (i.e., eschatological prophet) and the information gained from the facts, themes and motifs, and rhetorical strategies. Allison suggests five indices. The plausibility that a complex or topic originated with Jesus is increased if:

- (1) it illumines, or is illumined by, the paradigm of Jesus as eschatological prophet or known biographical information about him or one of the major themes;
- (2) the Christian tradition has seemingly struggled with it, and especially if there are signs that the early Jesus tradition itself sought to domesticate

169. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 17.

170. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 39-44.

171. Cf. Sanders above; Allison (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 52 n. 177) lists the following as at least some of the indisputable biographical facts: 'that Jesus was baptized by John, that he was a Galilean miracle-worker, that he was known as a teacher, that he was crucified in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius, and that shortly after his death some of his followers claimed he had risen from the dead'.

172. Allison lists seventeen repeated themes and motifs (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 46-47): the kingdom of God; future reward; future judgment; suffering/persecution of the saints; victory over evil powers; a sense that something new is here or at hand; the importance of John the Baptist; reference to 'the Son of Man'; God as Father; loving/serving/forgiving others; special regard for the unfortunate; intention as what matters most; hostility to wealth; extraordinary requests/difficult demands; conflict with the religious authorities; disciples as students and helpers; and Jesus as a miracle worker. And Allison lists eight formal literary features or rhetorical strategies (Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 49-50): parables; antithetical parallelism; rhetorical questions; prefatory 'amen'; the divine passive; exaggeration/hyperbole; aphoristic formulation; the unexpected or seemingly paradoxical.

or reinterpret the item. This is the so-called criterion of embarrassment;

- (3) one cannot concoct a persuasive narrative explaining its emergence in the post-Easter period. This is perhaps akin to the criterion of dissimilarity but omits altogether any contrast with Judaism;
- (4) it exhibits a confluence of several formal features, for instance a parable, antithetical parallelism and a rhetorical question (cf. Mt. 21.28-32); and
- (5) it has inconspicuous or unexpected connections with a complex already thought, on other grounds, to be dominical. This may be called the index of intertextual linkage.¹⁷³

The final step in the process is the search for confirmation of the reconstruction through history-of-religion parallels.¹⁷⁴ For Allison, this takes the form of a cross-cultural study of millenarian movements.¹⁷⁵ Following this procedural strategy, the reconstruction of Jesus, according to Allison, resembles Schweitzer's in most respects. Jesus was: (1) a 'Jewish prophet who demanded repentance in the face of the eschatological crisis and interpreted his own person and ministry in terms of scriptural fulfilment';¹⁷⁶ (2) a Jewish prophet whose chief goal was the eschatological restoration of Israel; (3) the leader of a millenarian movement; and (4) wrong: 'Jesus' generation, however, passed away. They all tasted death... For all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. Jesus the millenarian prophet, like all millenarian prophets, was *wrong*: reality has taken no notice of his imagination'.¹⁷⁷

Assessment. Allison has made a very honest and realistic contribution to the methodology and methods of Jesus research. Several points can be highlighted. One distinction is his critique and subsequent rejection of Crossan's pseudo-scientific objectivism. Allison, more than any other author I have considered, acknowledges the extent of the interpreter's subjectivism. In concluding his critique of Crossan's procedure, Allison writes, 'Maybe Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* is a monument not to his own failure but to the inevitable failure of all of us. Maybe our reach for the historical Jesus must always exceed our grasp'.¹⁷⁸ A second contribution of Allison's work is the reformulation and application of the criteria of authenticity that he calls indices. Crossan's call for a theoretical foundation within which to use the criteria is fully answered by Allison's

173. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 51-54.

174. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 69.

175. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 78-94.

176. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 69.

177. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 218, emphasis added.

178. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 33.

approach. Finally, his all-or-nothing conviction toward the truthfulness of the Jesus tradition is a very distinctive and courageous contribution to Jesus research.

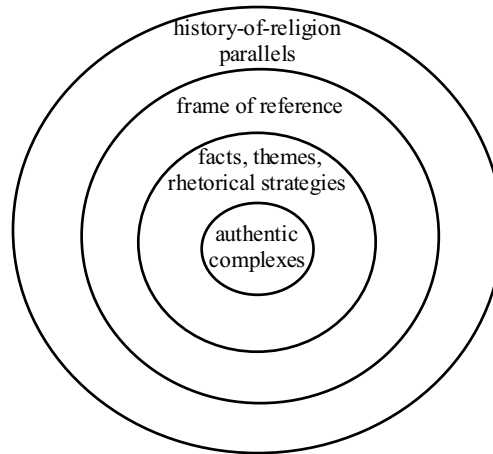


Figure 1. *Allison's Circles of Procedure*

If I found little to quibble with Theissen and Winter's approach, I find even less with Allison's. The primary weakness of Allison's work is at the point where he is especially reflective of the earlier approach of Sanders. Specifically, Allison emulates Sanders in his focus on 'indisputable facts' about Jesus. These 'facts' are a significant part of the formation of the interpretive context. Interestingly, Allison does what he criticizes Crossan—and by extension Sanders—for doing when he appeals to the opinion of a 'consensus' of scholars. In the end, the fundamental disagreement I would have with Allison in his resulting picture of Jesus as a failed eschatological prophet can be traced back to the issue of how much data is allowed to shape the initial interpretive framework. If he allowed, for instance, the messianic aspects of Jesus' life and teaching to be considered in the interpretive framework, how would his final product be altered? A second criticism could be levelled at this use of the history-of-religion parallels for confirming his reconstruction. The relevance of this data for informing or confirming our understanding of Jesus is debatable.

Conclusion

This essay represents my attempt to think critically about the presuppositions and procedures of the study of Jesus as a historical figure. The intention of this investigation was to create a recipe, a step-by-step procedure, for properly undertaking

a historical study of Jesus. The assessment, however, had quite a different result than the one I intended.

On the positive side, the study has shown that among the current procedural approaches to the historical study of Jesus there are 'better and worse' tactics. First, studies that are grounded in some form of a critical realism are to be preferred over those that continue to promote and practice a classical foundationalism. I do think that scholars such as Wright, Theissen and Winter, and especially Allison have done the field a great service by not simply acknowledging the presence of presuppositions, but even embracing their subjectivity in the process of doing an investigation. I would like to suggest, however, that further progress is necessary. Rather than our subjectivity being considered a virus that needs to be eradicated, I contend that we look on it as an attribute; something that should be valued as an important part of our method. Some, including confessional conservatives, will certainly object to this suggestion on the grounds that if our subjectivity is not kept in check, we will fall under Schweitzer's criticism of constructing a Jesus that is nothing more than the reflection of ourselves. I am tempted to respond to this criticism with the sarcastic quip: 'Well, the tactics of "limited consensus", "attainable honesty" and "critical realism", with which the twentieth-century second and third quests have worked, have *not exactly* protected the guild from this potentiality, have they?' So, in spite of the potential risks, perhaps a new tact is now warranted.

The position I would advocate is confessional in nature, by which I mean one that embraces *faith-based* presuppositions, although not necessarily Christian or even religious. What is more, the approach is humble and accountable within community. Perhaps Meier's 'unpapal conclave' of a confessional Catholic,¹⁷⁹ Protestant,¹⁸⁰ Jew¹⁸¹ and agnostic (and/or even an atheist) can be reintroduced here with significant modification. In my approach this conclave would be locked up in the bowels of a library *not* until they achieved a 'limited consensus', but

179. See Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 5.18-19 for the Catholic Church's position on the Gospels: 'The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of Apostolic origin...[and] they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John... whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation'.

180. For example, the Presbyterian Westminster Confession; see it online at http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/indexf.html, or Anglican Thirty-nine Articles at http://anglicanonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html, or the Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals at http://www.nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=nae.statement_of_faith. Accessed 26 January 2005.

181. For an example see the *Jerusalem School for Synoptic Research* online at <http://www.jerusalemsschool.org/index.htm>. Accessed 26 January 2005.

until they reached a mutual understanding of each other's views; views based on their *distinctive* presuppositions and consequent procedures. This endeavour would not be any less scholarly as particular as their views would be defensible and rooted in the history and culture of Second-Temple Judaism in Palestine. Yet, rather than being forced to create a document that states the least common denominator on Jesus, the participants would be forced to listen to each other and learn from each other in the context of community; rather than check their convictions at the door and pursue consensus, they would participate in full awareness of themselves and the others and pursue understanding; rather than debate in order to win, they would discuss in order to understand, acknowledging that the truth about Jesus, as with all truth, is both self-authenticating and convincing in the first instance when demonstrated in life.

In addition, a procedure that moves from an exploration of the general to the particular is to be preferred over those that move in the reverse. Theissen and Winter convincingly argue for the inextricable link between the authenticity of the saying and deeds of Jesus and the context in which they were spoken and done; that is, one cannot make a judgment of authenticity without first understanding the saying and deed, and the saying or deed cannot be understood until it is placed in a given historical context.¹⁸² This observation implies that the determination of authenticity of individual traditions is impossible without context. Additionally, Allison provided a convincing argument on the basis of human memories for the movement from *general impressions* about Jesus in the sources to the examination of individual traditions: his argument was that the most historical will most likely be the most general. The truthfulness of this procedural movement fuels the conviction of the necessity for establishing an interpretive framework prior to any decisions about the historicity of individual Jesus traditions.

Studies that argue that the *final product* of the investigation is the actual field of battle in the debate over the historical Jesus are better than those that insist that the battle is in the details, in the decisions and judgments about the authenticity of the complexes. There is an intrinsic truthfulness in the approach which asserts that the reconstructions of Jesus are not falsified or shown inadequate by the determination of the authenticity of individual concrete traditions, as if our historical conclusions can be tested in a laboratory, but by their power to convince and persuade, by their clarity and simplicity, their ability to account for all the data, and their explanatory power in related areas.¹⁸³ This is not to say that

182. Theissen and Winter, *The Quest*, pp. 191-99.

183. This view smacks, admittedly, of what Evans (*Historical Christ*, pp. 223-26) has called coherentism, which is an epistemological reaction to foundationalism that understands justification in a 'holistic' fashion; on this view an individual's beliefs are interconnected in a systematic way, and the justification of a belief lies in its coherence with all one's other beliefs. Evans

the details are unimportant since, admittedly, the *final product* will ultimately be the sum total of the details. The point, however, is that the debate must centre not on the authenticity of this or that saying but in the validity of the portrait of Jesus that is the result.

Thirdly, studies that do not rest on a particular solution to the Synoptic Problem are to be preferred over those that do. Although I do not think there can be much doubt that the Synoptic Gospels are interrelated in some way, I am very sympathetic to Wright's attempt to sideline a judgment on the Synoptic Problem in his historical Jesus methodology. Moreover, I am intrigued by the question, posed by some, of the impact of 'informal, but controlled' oral tradition and the itinerate nature of Jesus' ministry on the formation of the Synoptics.¹⁸⁴ This observation points to the conclusion that the Synoptic Gospels may not be as literary interrelated as is often thought. To my mind, this is a welcomed circumstance in the study of the Gospels. In my research in Matthew's Gospel I have felt that the solutions offered in the current discussion are much too simplistic. Moreover, I am amazed at the confidence scholars seem to possess in their decisions about Matthew's sources. I have serious doubts that we can determine with any real exactitude what sources a given evangelist used outside perhaps the use of Mark. To make any definitive interpretations rest on a source-critical foundation seems to be unwise.

Finally, in spite of the tidal wave of recent popular and scholarly interest in 'Lost Gospels', and 'Lost Christianities',¹⁸⁵ most scholars, as our study reveals, remain ambivalent about the usefulness of the non-canonical gospels in constructing a picture of Jesus of Nazareth. Despite statements to the contrary, most

critiques coherentism for three reasons: (1) it would seem that there must be many belief systems that are equally coherent, and it seems strange to regard all such systems as equally justified in the evaluative sense; (2) because indefinitely many incompatible belief systems can be seen as coherent, it is hard to see how coherence can have the kind of relation to truth that is desirable in an epistemology; and (3) what we are justified in believing depends to some degree upon my relation to the external world, and not simply on the internal coherence of my beliefs. I would distance myself from this position by pointing out that justification for a picture of Jesus is not simply the result of being coherent since most of the pictures of Jesus are coherent in their own way. Justification for a picture of Jesus *must* also correspond to reality; *it must explain the extant sources about Jesus—his 'wirkungsgeschichte'*.

184. Cf. the recent work of Dunn (*Jesus Remembered*, p. 139) who attempts to 'alter the default setting' in Gospel studies by arguing that 'the literary paradigm (including a clearly delineated Q document) is too restrictive in the range of possible explanations it offers for the diverse/divergent character of Synoptic parallels'; see also Rainer Riesner, *Jesus Als Lehrer. Eine Untersuchung Zum Ursprung Der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT, 7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1981).

185. See Bart Ehrman's recent works: *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

scholars continue to hold the conviction that the best and surest source of evidence for Jesus, no matter how layered the tradition might be, is found in the four-fold Gospel tradition of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Notwithstanding the foregoing positive conclusions, I have a fundamental scepticism about the entire endeavour—at least as it is practised¹⁸⁶—especially from the standpoint of a confessionally conservative presupposition. In the rest of the conclusion I wish to highlight, in quite a random order, the primary points of scepticism with the pursuit of the so-called ‘historical Jesus’. It is my hope that these comments, while not novel, will spur dialogue about the purpose and process of the historical study of Jesus. I readily admit that the views expressed here are a work-in-progress and I wish to be perceived as critical not condescending. Yet, the emotional candour with which I express the following scepticism I feel is justified, and is born out of a genuine frustration with the presuppositions and procedures that were handed down to me by my professors and a generation of scholarship.

The first, and perhaps most significant, point is the pervasive view among Jesus scholars that a confessional approach to the study of Jesus of Nazareth is antithetical to historical inquiry. This view is both unwarranted and unrealistic. It is unwarranted because, while I would not wish to pronounce all confessional scholarship as good historical research—there are many examples to the contrary—it has neither been demonstrated nor am I persuaded that in order to do good historical research, one must fence off confessionalism. And that is to say nothing of whether or not this is even possible. It seems to me that good historical scholarship is neither a result of confessionalism nor neutrality, if it even exists, but engagement with the sources and the ability to make sense of the data within its own historical setting.

The predominant view is also unrealistic, because the view ignores the glaring reality that every scholar functions within some confession, whether this confession is the theological tenets of the church or of tradition criticism or of something else.

Another point is one of definition. Many scholars have not defined who or what it is they are attempting to study when they use the phrase ‘the historical Jesus’. Though I think there is a basic and ‘shared’ understanding of the term (i.e., the uninterpreted, human Jesus of Nazareth), often scholars have different objects in view. I noticed this problem most recently in the work of a prominent evangelical scholar. Darrell Bock has written a two-volume work on Jesus, the

186. This qualifying statement is *very* important. I am *not* suggesting that history should be abandoned in the study of Jesus, or that history is irrelevant in the investigation of the Gospels and early Christianity. I affirm that Jesus and early Christianity can only be truly understood when they are placed within their historical contexts. Many of the failures of the church in the twentieth century, not least Nazi Germany, can be traced, at least in part, to an *ahistorical* Jesus and Christianity.

first of which is titled, *Studying the Historical Jesus*.¹⁸⁷ Yet in reality this is not an appropriate title for the book, at least if one defines the ‘historical Jesus’ as most scholars today do. On the second page of the introduction Bock describes more appropriately what he is doing; he is ‘studying the Jesus as presented in the four Gospels’.¹⁸⁸ And then later he admits ‘my subsequent work [*Jesus According to the Scriptures*] belongs to the third quest, although in focusing so heavily on Scripture, it is not a historical work in the technical, critical sense’.¹⁸⁹ The title of the second volume is much more descriptive of his project, *Jesus According to the Scriptures*¹⁹⁰ and, thus, the first would be better titled *Studying the Canonical Jesus*. My point here is not at all to call into question Bock’s work, but I reference his recent book on Jesus to show that we must be more careful in our use of the term the ‘historical Jesus’. The phrase quite possibly is no longer useful as a descriptive term, since it carries the baggage of earlier critical scholarship. Many, it seems, take the meaning for granted or take the terminology up uncritically.

For most scholars who study the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth, the object of inquiry is a hypothetical person disembowelled of any interpretation. The ‘historical perspective’ to them means removing the husk of interpretation to find the seed of history: getting to ‘what really happened’, uncovering ‘who he *really* claimed to be and what he *actually* did’.¹⁹¹ They are attempting to get to the *uninterpreted* Jesus. I question whether this objective is an appropriate historical pursuit. What does it mean to study Jesus from a historical perspective? Does it mean that we attempt to ‘tell it like it was’? The fact is our knowledge of Jesus is always mediated to us through sources.¹⁹² It seems to me that probity whispers that the quest for ‘what actually happened’ is not possible, and we should be more attentive to its voice.

Moreover, maybe scholars, especially conservatives, are misguided when they assert things like: ‘We must distinguish historical data contained in this text from what the fourth Evangelist is doing with this material and the narrative framework in which it is now found’.¹⁹³ This customary line of questioning

187. Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

188. Bock, *Historical Jesus*, p. 14.

189. Bock, *Historical Jesus*, p. 152.

190. Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to the Scriptures: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

191. Bock, *Jesus According to the Scriptures*, p. 17.

192. Green (‘Quest’, p. 553) writes: ‘“History”, in the sense of “historical knowledge”, is not and cannot be “what actually happened.” Instead, “history” and the “past” exist in a kind of bartering relationship—the past providing environmental situations, personages, and events; history providing significance through selectivity and narration. Hence history is both less and more than the past.’

193. Robert L. Webb, ‘Jesus’ Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications’, *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 10.2 (2000), pp. 261-309 (303).

needs to be fundamentally reconsidered as a means to the end, since we do not possess the tools, let alone the capability, to achieve the aimed-for result. The last century of Jesus research, of which we are heirs, quite possibly, has been misguided presuppositionally and procedurally. Thus, I find Green's contribution to the discussion refreshing and his assessment of Jesus-research accurate: 'critical inquiry in Jesus-research has not been critical enough—that is self-critical enough'.¹⁹⁴

A third issue over which I am quite sceptical in the quest for the 'historical Jesus' is the value of tradition criticism. Scholars argue that the Gospels can be divided into roughly three layers: what comes from Jesus, what was created by the oral tradition of the early church and what was produced by the editorial work of the evangelist. According to them, the Jesus scholar's task is to work *back* through the tradition history to the first layer of tradition to *find* the historical Jesus. As I pointed out in an earlier discussion, however, scholars are not able to distinguish legitimately one layer from another any more than one can divide a river into its constituent sources. The problem is that though scholars acknowledge the weaknesses of tradition criticism—as they have been well documented in recent years, they still assume, in their very confident application of them, we can be bias-free in our use of them. This is simply not the case. The tools alone do not get us back to the sayings and deeds of Jesus.¹⁹⁵ Over-confidence in what the tools of the historical-critical method can satisfactorily produce pervades Jesus research.

A question that I continue to mull over in my mind is what value does tradition criticism with its criteria of authenticity really have? Even those who consider themselves evangelical scholars affirm the use of tradition criticism and say it is *important* in order to show that a particular saying or deed goes back to Jesus and was not simply made up by, say, Matthew or Mark.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile others encourage one to look at places where the event or teaching goes 'against the grain' of the authors' general purposes and it is in these areas that one can be 'more confident' that these traditions go back to Jesus.¹⁹⁷ In response to the latter point the determination of what constitutes 'against the grain' is extremely difficult, and not obvious. This is especially true in light of the recent acknowledgment by Synoptic scholars that the absence of an evangelist's fingerprints on a tradition does not, in itself, necessarily imply anything since

194. Green, 'Quest', p. 553.

195. See Allison (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 7-10): the problem of Faustina.

196. Grant Osborne, 'Redaction Criticism', in David Alan Black (ed.), *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 199-224 (207); cf. also more recently Bock, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 199-203.

197. Sanders and Davies, *Synoptic Gospels*, p. 301; cf. also Bockmuehl, *This Jesus*, p. 20.

the inclusion of a tradition implies approval.¹⁹⁸ This truthful observation makes redaction criticism all the harder. The delineation of the sources an evangelist used and the manner in which they used them are nearly impenetrable.¹⁹⁹

With respect to the first appeal of the usefulness of tradition criticism, in spite of the assertion to the contrary, I am still left wondering what one has really gained by the application of the criteria of authenticity. If I apply these criteria to a given saying or deed, what assurance will it provide for me? Does it really anchor the idea in the historical person of Jesus? Can we really separate the authors from their traditions? Can we really distinguish the author's historical point of view from the story they narrate? The fact is these criteria cannot be applied neutrally and will be affected by the one using them. Moreover, it is unrealistic to think that these criteria can act as a neutral arbiter between two competing views.

For instance, as an American-Protestant-Baptist-confessional-conservative-scholar, I come to the study of Jesus with certain preconceived notions, of which one is the trustworthiness of the four-fold Gospel. This being so, I approach the Jesus tradition, in the first instance, with a confidence in its 'historicity'.²⁰⁰ Thus, if I am honest with myself, there is no tradition that I would consider 'inauthentic' *simply* on the basis of the application of a criterion. This circumstance, however, is not only the problem of a 'naïve, pre-critical conservative', but, in truth, it is the common experience of all interpreters as I argued above. If this is indeed the case, what real purpose does tradition criticism serve? It is true that criteria when used positively can *corroborate* a given tradition's authenticity. But, that conceded, what still is the usefulness of this kind of argument, given that one can demonstrate just about any tradition within the Gospels fits into the diversity of Second Temple Judaism? When we have come to believe its authenticity and then apply the criterion, one might argue for an 'apologetic' utility, but will it really convince anyone who is not already sympathetic to a conservative viewpoint?²⁰¹

198. See Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 52.

199. The distinguishing and identification of an evangelist's sources in a given pericope is tenuous, not least because all we possess are the literary compositions in their final form. See Stanton (*A Gospel*, p. 41) who writes concerning Matthew: 'The formation of Matthew's gospel may have been the result of a much longer and a much more complex process than the "one-stage" redaction commonly envisaged. Even though it is very difficult indeed to isolate with confidence changes made to Mark, Q, or "M" traditions by redactors other than Matthew, there are good grounds for urging caution: not every difference between Matthew and the sources which he drew represents a modification introduced by the evangelist Matthew himself.'

200. Of course, the idea of 'historicity' cannot be flat, but must be both appropriate to the genre and elastic enough to allow for the selective nature of historical narrative.

201. See L.T. Johnson's (*The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* [San Francisco: Harper, 1997], p. 63) poignant and justified critique of conservative Christian scholarship: 'A more complex pattern of avoidance

Finally, I am sceptical of the assumption that has provided the motivation for the pursuit of the historical Jesus, namely, that the Gospels are unreliable historical witnesses and, therefore, another historical narrative, which is *more historical*, needs to be created. This assumption is faulty because it is based on ‘positivist pretensions’ of nineteenth-century historicism that ignore the realities of selectivity and narration in every historical account.²⁰² Because of this faulty assumption, it should not be the reason for studying Jesus.

I am not suggesting that more historical narratives should not be manufactured about the person of Jesus. He is arguably one of the most important figures in history and scholars and lay persons alike will always be interested in him. What I am suggesting, however, is that these ‘new’ historical narratives not be given pride of place over the four narratives that have been passed down to us through the agency of the church.

Perhaps we should spend less of our time as scholars reconstructing new historical narratives and more time wrestling with the meaning of the four-fold gospel in all its richness and diversity. In this regard, I find that Bock’s general approach in his book, *Jesus According to the Scriptures*, is a welcome contribution to the endeavour, though most would not consider it a historical Jesus study.²⁰³ Although not without its own inherent weaknesses, I am inclined to think that an approach which: (1) deals *seriously* with the complex, but complementary, portraits of the canonical Jesus—without discounting out of hand information from non-canonical sources—and (2) places that construct plausibly within its first-century Jewish context, is as close to the ‘historical Jesus’ as we will ever come.

can be found among those professors of New Testament in conservative seminaries who have managed to combine “critical scholarship” with the demands of traditional authority. A careful reading of their publications reveals that the scholarship is “critical” in form much more than substance; the paraphernalia of the academy are used—often with considerable cleverness—to support conclusions already determined by doctrine.’

202. Green, ‘Quest’, p. 553.

203. See Craig Blomberg’s endorsement on the dustcover of Bock’s *Jesus According to the Scriptures*: ‘Neither a contribution to historical-Jesus research nor a conventional textbook on the Gospels...’