

## The Secularizing of the Historical Jesus

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The modern world has, according to the current wisdom, witnessed three quests for the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The first was the nineteenth century German endeavor so ingeniously and memorably reported by Albert Schweitzer.<sup>2</sup> The second was the new quest, inaugurated by Ernst Käsemann's famous 1953 lecture in Marburg<sup>3</sup> and then carried on by some of Rudolf Bultmann's students and a few others. The so-called third quest, christened such by N. T. Wright,<sup>4</sup> is the name now often attached to the labors of the present moment.<sup>5</sup>

It is unfortunate that this neat triadic division of our subject has now established itself in our surveys and textbooks. For in its simplicity it is simplistic: it obscures much more than it illumines. One fundamental failing is that it dismisses with silence the period between the "first quest" and the "new quest." The inescapable implication is that nothing much, or nothing much of importance, was then going on. One chronicler of Jesus research has affirmed that the interval in question can indeed be called the period of "no quest." He says that, between 1906 and 1953, a newfound awareness that Christians typically look down the well of history only to see their own reflected faces, combined with skepticism about Mark's historicity, the acids of form criticism, and a new theology that isolated faith from history created "a period where the general optimism of discovering a relevant historical Jesus behind the portraits of the Gospels, an optimism which fueled the 'Old Quest,' was lost."<sup>6</sup> In line with this, N. T. Wright says that, during the first half of our century, there was a "moratorium" upon questing for Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

This is just not true.<sup>8</sup> Anyone can properly assess this claim by walking into a decent theological library and looking at the shelves. If the expectation is that, after Schweitzer and before Käsemann, New Testament scholars gave up questing for Jesus, one will be dumbfounded. As a sample of what one might find in such a library I subjoin at the end of this essay a list of some of the relevant books that appeared between 1906 and 1953. With the understandable exception of a couple of years during WWI (1914, 1915), only one year (1919) did not, according to my cursory researches, witness a new book on Jesus by an academic. Moreover, very few of the names on my list will be unfamiliar to anyone who has done serious work on the New Testament, so it was scarcely only marginal scholars who were engaged in the quest for Jesus: we are not talking about second stringers on the sidelines of New Testament studies. It was, on the contrary, not only a rather large but more importantly a fairly august body of scholars that was unaware of the supposed moratorium upon questing for Jesus.

The inevitable inference to be drawn from my list of titles, that questing for Jesus was alive and well in the decades after Schweitzer, is more than confirmed by the hundreds upon hundreds of articles then written on the historical Jesus<sup>9</sup> as well as by the surveys of research that come from that time. In 1925 Shirley Jackson Case remarked that "writers upon the life of Jesus who have taken up seriously the task of carrying forward the work of historical criticism, in its application to the study of the life of Jesus, have performed some significant tasks during the past quarter century."<sup>10</sup> A decade after that, E. F. Scott could write that "nothing is more remarkable in the literature of our time than the endless procession of Lives of Jesus," and he was not just offering a generalization about popular books: "all the time it [our critical picture of Jesus] is taking more definite shape. Each of these writers [J. Klausner, J. Warschauer, S. J. Case, R.

Bultmann, B. W. Bacon], and the list might be greatly extended, has brought at least one aspect of the history into fuller relief. All the discussion . . . is clearly the way towards something like a true judgment."<sup>11</sup> C. C. McCown spoke in 1940 of "evidence of progress" in connection with the study of the historical Jesus in the period since Schweitzer, and he was optimistic about its continuation: "The new critical techniques and the new philosophical points of view which now prevail provide new means for solving the [old] problems in their new forms. Progress is possible . . . ." <sup>12</sup> Two years later D. T. Rowlinson wrote about "The Continuing Quest of the Historical Jesus" and how it had been "carried forward in recent years."<sup>13</sup> And in 1950 A. M. Hunter published The Work and Words of Jesus,<sup>14</sup> a popular digest of the allegedly non-existent quest.

In view of the manifest facts, what has nurtured our ignorance of the past and led to the false generalization, so often now met, that the period after Bultmann gave up the quest? Beyond the unfortunate fact that too many now neglect to read old books because they evidently imagine that new books have rendered them obsolete, two factors especially suggest themselves. One is that, largely because of source criticism, and to a lesser extent because of form criticism, even conservative English scholarship came to the conclusion that "a biography of Jesus cannot be provided."<sup>15</sup> Thus A. M. Hunter, at mid-century, thought that one of chief features of books on Jesus over the previous fifty years was that they had largely ceased to aspire to be biographies in any traditional sense.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps some have misunderstood the circumstance that academics quit writing biographies of Jesus to mean that they had given up writing about his life and teaching. But the two are hardly the same thing. The dearth of traditional lives, the abandoning of the Markan framework, and the refusal to map the development of Jesus' self-consciousness cannot

be equated with a dearth of studies on the historical Jesus. So the first half of our century was not the period of "no quest" but of "no biography."<sup>17</sup>

Another factor, and probably the more weighty one, is that so many now, regardless of their own theological stance, see the past through Bultmannian eyes. This is a mistake, although it is understandable. Rudolf Bultmann must be reckoned the foremost New Testament scholar of his century. At no time, however, were he and his students the only players in the theological game, even in Germany; and it took several decades before the full impact of his skeptical form-critical investigations began to be widely felt abroad.<sup>18</sup> Before the 1950s many serious researchers in the English-speaking world still regarded form criticism as a "tempest in a teapot."<sup>19</sup> Beyond that, it was only in the late 1950s that Bultmann's theological views began to make numerous converts outside his own country.<sup>20</sup> Hugh Anderson could still write in 1964 that "the big guns of the new theological movement on the Continent certainly caused no immediate tottering at the foundations of British historical-critical scholarship. It would be safe to say that there has been hardly less distrust among British than among American scholars in these last forty years toward the 'crisis theology' or the 'theology of the Word.'"<sup>21</sup>

In 1959 W. D. Davies entitled his inaugural lecture at Union Theological Seminary in New York, "A Quest to Be Resumed in New Testament Studies."<sup>22</sup> The subject was the historical Jesus. By that time a significant number of Anglo-American scholars had indeed begun to notice that the quest had been or was being given up in certain important quarters: skepticism was settling in everywhere. But timidity in reconstructing the life and teachings of Jesus was a recent development. As Professor Davies has told me, no one in Britain or America would have delivered a lecture with his a title like his, which implied that the quest had been interrupted, in

1920 or 1930 or 1940 or even 1950. Only later did the sort of confidence in the Jesus tradition that one finds in T. W. Manson and Vincent Taylor begin to look uncritical to just about everybody. Only in the 1950s did English-speaking scholars come to appreciate fully that the gospels reflect above all the manifold interests of early Christians, and that those interests were far removed from those of modern historians. Concurrent with this realization, and spurred on by the growing influence of Paul Tillich and translations of the writings of Bultmann and Karl Barth, doubt as to the theological relevance of the historical Jesus began to assail many. It is no coincidence that Martin Kähler's Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus--the original German edition was first published in the nineteenth century--found no English translator until the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> And yet, by then, by the time that the influence of the old British-anchored conservatism was waning, the so-called "new quest" had already been set in motion, so there was hardly ever a period of "no quest."

All this was at one time not esoteric knowledge. In 1959 James M. Robinson began his book, A New Quest of the Historical Jesus, by referring to the obvious, namely, "the relatively untroubled and uninterrupted quest of the historical Jesus going on in French and Anglo-Saxon scholarship."<sup>24</sup> As Robinson knew, the quest had been discontinued in Bultmannian quarters but not elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> So the new quest that he hailed was quite self-consciously a specifically post-Bultmannian undertaking constructed upon "a critical restudy of the Bultmannian position by his leading pupils."<sup>26</sup> Some retrospects, however, now often leave the mistaken impression that the evolution of the Bultmannian school--which was a thoroughly German Protestant phenomenon that interacted hardly at all with Catholics or Protestants who did not write in German--can be equated with the course of New Testament studies after WWI. Such retrospects lead the unwary

astray, to the defective inference that since the old quest ended with Schweitzer and the new quest started with Käsemann, in between no one could have been searching for the historical Jesus.

Perhaps the current typology appeals to some because, despite the post-Schweitzerian labors outside of Bultmann's circle, nothing of lasting value or interest was, so they condescendingly presume, produced. Robinson for one eschewed the "relatively untroubled and uninterrupted quest of the historical Jesus" in France and the English-speaking world, as well as the products of the old style German questers such as Joachim Jeremias and Ethelbert Stauffer. For Robinson, the important studies had not and were not going to come from anywhere but dialogue with Bultmann. A similar sort of judgment is (even if unintended) seemingly implicit in the current typology of the quest, according to which there was, despite the plethora of literature, no real quest for fifty years.

But maybe Robinson was wrong and had things backward, and I at least am tempted to think of the current typology as an expression of ingratitude. For if anything failed it was the so-called new quest. Despite being the middle member of the current typology, its productivity, comparatively speaking, was short-lived and hardly far-reaching.<sup>27</sup> The non-Bultmannian circles, by contrast, had produced, before Käsemann's oft-cited lecture, at least four crucial works of enduring value--Jeremias' Die Gleichnisse Jesu, his Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu, Dodd's The Parables of the Kingdom, and T. W. Manson's The Sayings of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Manson's book still "is consulted regularly for its commentary value"<sup>29</sup>--a truly rare feat for a volume written fifty years ago; and, if I may be personal, my own recent theory of the evolution of Q, for what it may be worth, grew out of Manson's insight that Q falls into discrete major sections.<sup>30</sup> As for the

contributions of Jeremias and Dodd on the parables, they remain as important as anything else on the same subject that has since come along. Norman Perrin had it right when he observed, of Jeremias' The Parables of Jesus, that "today it is the essential starting point for parable research. It represents a watershed in the development of the discussion, taking up into itself . . . the work of the two most important previous contributors, Adolf Jülicher and C. H. Dodd."<sup>31</sup> This sentence, written in 1975, has not been undone by a quarter century of further study. One could equally say that Jeremias' work on the last supper took up into itself the important studies that came before it, and it has become foundational for all subsequent study of its subject.

There is more to my argument, I should like to emphasize, than just getting our own history down right and recognizing, out of courtesy and for the sake of humility, our debt to predecessors. Those who do not know the exegetical past condemn themselves to repeat it, to recapitulating older debates unknowingly. Many now suffer from exegetical amnesia, so that they stake out old claims as though they were new. Moreover, if we can cast aside the strange notion that New Testament scholarship must, like the hard sciences, ever progress onward and upward, then there is no reason to doubt that some of the older books about Jesus might get us as close or closer to the truth than some of the more recent ones.

If the typology I am criticizing falsely characterizes the first half of the twentieth century and may mislead people into believing that during that time scholars did not produce instructive literature on Jesus, it also distorts the facts for the period between 1950 and 1980, the latter being the date one chronicler offers for the approximate birth date of the so-called third quest.<sup>32</sup> This is the period in which the new quest of Bultmann's students is located. But much else--I would say much else of more importance--must also be located here.<sup>33</sup> Concurrent with and more or less

independent of the much ballyhooed but disappointing new quest, and before 1980, publishers gave us the books in the second list subjoined to the end of this article (which, like the first, makes no pretense to being exhaustive). The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s also saw the publication of important New Testament Christologies that had much to say about Jesus--those of Oscar Cullmann (1957), Ferdinand Hahn (1963), and R. H. Fuller (1965) were perhaps the most prominent--as well as three significant German theologies of the New Testament that open with substantial accounts of the historical Jesus--those of Werner Kümmel (1969), Leonard Goppelt (1975), and Jeremias (1971, unfinished). And then there were the articles which, as a glance at the appropriate volumes of Elenchus reveals, were not lacking. Gustav Aulén, writing in 1973, observed that "literature on Jesus is now experiencing prosperity."<sup>34</sup> That was over twenty-five years ago, before many now tell us the supposed third quest started. Aulén was correct.<sup>35</sup> So one wonders what is truly different about the recent contributions, and why so much of the literature I have cited should be excluded from our typology and so shoved into oblivion.

What sets the so-called third quest apart from previous quests? Although several traits have been nominated, none much helps us with this question. The attention to extra-canonical sources--so important for some current questers--is sometimes said to mark the third quest. But many contemporary questers, including E. P. Sanders and John Meier, stick pretty much to the canonical sources. And in any case the discussion and evaluation of traditions about Jesus in extra-biblical materials is scarcely a post new quest phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> The discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents, including the Gospel of Thomas, has certainly enlarged our interest in the non-canonical sources for Jesus, but such interest was hardly born around 1980.<sup>37</sup>

The struggle against apocalyptic eschatology, against the belief that Jesus thought the



eschatological consummation to be at hand, a struggle that characterizes the work of John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Burton Mack, might also be thought a singular feature of the current discussion.<sup>38</sup> But this too is nothing new under the sun. Crossan and the others have just taken the baton from earlier scholars such as C. H. Dodd, T. Francis Glasson, and John A. T. Robinson, and it is not obvious that the former have had more influence in our day than the latter had in theirs.

Nor can one find anything much original in the way of method. N. T. Wright has indeed urged on the contrary that the third quest sets itself apart by an emphasis upon Jesus' Jewish context and Jewish character.<sup>39</sup> There is some truth in this. But this emphasis is part and parcel of a much larger tendency, the attempt to interpret all of earliest Christianity as a Jewish phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> Thus Paul's Jewish context and character are also highlighted by present scholarship. In addition, the focus upon Jesus the Jew marks not a new beginning but only an intensification of lines of investigation that were opened by our predecessors. Rudolf Otto, William Manson, and Jeremias were all, in their own ways, trying to find Jesus by looking for Judaism. We may regard their use of Jewish sources as less sophisticated than our own; and we may further, with the guilt of the Holocaust hanging over our heads and the modern spirit of relativism urging us not to reckon one religion better than another, see more continuity with Judaism than they did. And yet we continue to walk in the direction which they, along with so many earlier Jewish scholars who wrote about Jesus,<sup>41</sup> were headed.

Birger Pearson has suggested that the alleged third quest is "distinguishable from the first two quests in claiming to lack any theological agenda."<sup>42</sup> One can concur that E. P. Sanders does not wear his theological convictions (whatever they may or may not be) on his sleeve and that

John Meier has been trying to write about Jesus with minimal interference from his Catholic convictions. But then neither scholar is in this respect typical. Are we to say that Ben F. Meyer, A. E. Harvey, N. T. Wright, and anyone else who does write with significant theological interest cannot be third questers? Furthermore, it is evident that some we might think of as having no theological agenda are partly animated by an animus against traditional Christian doctrine, which is in reality just another sort of theological agenda.<sup>43</sup> The truth is that none of us is free of philosophical biases or theological interests when we examine the origins of Christianity, so the alleged lack thereof seems a questionable criterion for classifying scholars who quest for Jesus.

One is not even sure the so-called third quest's volume of production, so much remarked upon, means much. There just happen to be more New Testament scholars and publishers of what those scholars produce than in the past. This is why books on Paul have also multiplied of late. So too have books on Hebrews, and even books on James and Jude. The guild is much larger than in the past, and there are many more publishers and journals than in the past, so there are naturally more books and articles on Jesus than in the past.<sup>44</sup>

Maybe the major difference between what is going on now and what went on earlier is that today, for whatever reason, some of the books about Jesus have garnered unexpected publicity. Maybe the quest has changed less than its marketing.

To what extent is the assertion that we have recently embarked upon a third quest due to the ever-present temptation to flatter ourselves and bestow upon our own age exaggerated significance, to imagine the contemporary to be of more moment than it is? We often cannot read our place in history very well. We typically enlarge and isolate it and so distort it. A friend just sent me an article explaining how science and religion are finally finding common ground. I read

an article very much like it the year before, and another the year before that; and if the truth be known, the public has been treated to the same fare every year for the past one hundred. In like manner, there is less new about the current quest than its practitioners seem willing to concede: all the excitement is overdone. I find it refreshing that John Riches, whose work Wright slots into the third quest, characterizes himself as addressing the issues of Reimarus.<sup>45</sup> There is something to be said for Colin Brown's analysis: "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. For connections between current research and what has gone before appear to continue without interruption."<sup>46</sup>

Although there is indeed a contemporary quest for Jesus, it is not manifest that there is really much new or distinctive about it. Certainly the current search is not a thing easily fenced off from its predecessors. It has no characteristic method. It has no body of shared conclusions. It has no common set of historiographical or theological presuppositions.<sup>47</sup> And trying to locate its beginning is like trying to find the origins of modern science: the ever-present continuity with and debt to the past make convenient divisions into neat periods suspect. Given that there are always trends in research no less than in fashion, I am sure one could draw a line at 1990, find some common features in the books written about Jesus since then, and declare that we have actually entered a fourth quest. This would be a foolish exercise--but no more foolish than saying that Jesus research actually began around 1980.

Sometimes history does suggest that we divide it in a particular way. Judaism was truly different after 70 C.E. than it was before, just as the American South was truly different after the Civil War than it was before. At other times, however, the lines we write upon history for our own practical ends, lines that beguile because they are convenient, are also delusive. More often than not the patterns we espy in history are, like Providence, less than evident. They can be

phantasms conjured by our seemingly innate desire to bring order out of chaos, in our case the chaos that is the discipline of New Testament studies. But sometimes everything is a maze; and what if, in these pluralistic times, when researchers are less often the members of schools,<sup>48</sup> when there are no more dominating figures such as Dodd or Bultmann to lead the way, when most are independent, there is little convenient order to be discerned? Should our desire for such order be allowed to disguise the messy facts? What if our divisions between quests are lines drawn in the water?<sup>49</sup> Blake says somewhere: "Education teaches straight lines but life is fuzzy."<sup>50</sup>

The pluralism referred to in the previous paragraph needs to be fully reckoned with. The idea that current books about Jesus belong to their own discrete epoch presumes that they share a sufficient number of distinct and common characteristics. But here are what two different cartographers of recent Jesus research have had to say about the supposed third quest:

The current wave of books about Jesus offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement about method; certainly no common set of results (N. T. Wright)<sup>51</sup>

There is certainly no common methodology or sense of unity of purpose beyond the conviction that more may be known about Jesus than was known or admitted in the earlier quests.<sup>52</sup> If the term Third Quest is taken to embrace all scholarly investigation of the relationship between the texts of the NT and the historical figure of Jesus in the light of current knowledge of the first-century world, we are at once confronted with a variety of conflicting views and methods (Colin Brown)<sup>53</sup>

It may well be that, beyond their being produced in the same period, contemporary books on Jesus belong together not because they share common assumptions, methods, or conclusions but because, paradoxically, they do not. In other words, it is the comparatively inordinate disagreement among ourselves that differentiates current work from the past. If so, the cause is no mystery. Something similar has happened to every other subject in the humanities in recent decades. Escalating diversity is a function of the unprecedented increase in the number PhDs and so of the number of writers within the guild. In such a context, no one figure can dominate: the age of the giants, of dominating figures, is over. There is, as in the days of the Judges, no king, so all the people do whatever is right in their own eyes. This is why "the closer we get to our own day, the harder it is to plot patterns and movements."<sup>54</sup> In sum, while one may make some helpful generalizations about, let us say, the study of Jesus in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, it is increasingly difficult to make useful generalizations about more recent work, there or elsewhere.

We may anticipate that it will only get harder as time passes. When W. R. Telford, to the contrary, lists eight features of recent studies which support the notion that they are distinctive,<sup>55</sup> perhaps he is engaging in an antiquated activity that needs to be deconstructed. That some of those features appear in books decades old<sup>56</sup> whereas others are absent from significant current works<sup>57</sup> should give us pause. Maybe our lists are starting to look tendentious because the age of the easy generalization and the authentic consensus is over.

My own conviction is that it has not been very helpful to divide all the post-Schweitzerian activities into chronological segments or different quests. It would probably be more useful to lay aside the diachronic in favor of the synchronic, to abandon periodization for a typology that

would allow us to classify a book, whether from the 1920s or the 1990s, with those akin to it. Perhaps we might lump together those books that present Jesus as a liberal social reformer, or those that present him as forerunner of Christian orthodoxy, or those that reconstruct him as an eschatological Jewish prophet, or those that liken him to a Cynic-like sage, or those that regard him as having been a political revolutionary, and so on.<sup>58</sup> Even here, however, our generalizing descriptions would hide as much as they reveal, so if we were ever to imagine them to be anything other than flawed overviews for beginners we would deceive ourselves.

Having said all this, I should like, before closing, to remark upon an increasingly common hermeneutical move in the literature on Jesus. Its advent does not undo the promiscuous diversity of the present, for it is far from being ubiquitous, but its appearance in scattered works does perhaps say something about the present moment. I refer to what I call the secularizing of Jesus. By this I do not mean that non-religious publishers now give us books on Jesus and that presumably they garner readers from outside the church. Nor do I mean that nonChristians now contribute to our discussions, although that is happily true enough. What I mean rather is this, that many texts which have, for two thousand years, invariably received explicitly religious interpretations do so no longer. In other words, they are now sometimes given diminished theological content. Let me briefly illustrate with seven random instances:

1. The parable of the sower recounts the four different fates of seeds that fall in different places.<sup>59</sup> The allegorical interpretation that accompanies the parable in the synoptics turns the narrative into a lesson about preaching the gospel. In stark contrast to this theological understanding, Charles Hedrick has argued that our parable, which fails to remark upon the farmer's plowing or God's intervention, "tends to subvert a religious view of the natural

processes, a view that looks to God as the source of the blessings and the curses of nature, a view that sacramentalizes the cosmos."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, "because of its secularity and its tacit failure to acknowledge God's sovereignty over nature and to insist on the fulfillment of an individual's holy obligations to God in order to ensure the harvest, the story resonates with impiety. Hence the story subverts the faith of Israel by challenging its fictive view of reality."<sup>61</sup> For Hedrick, Jesus' parable actually opposes the Shema (Deut 11:13-21), which promises divine intervention to make crops prosper if one wholeheartedly loves and serves God.

2. In Matthew and Luke, the parable of the unexpected burglar functions as a warning to watch for Jesus' eschatological return.<sup>62</sup> The Jesus Seminar, however, does not attribute an apocalyptic eschatology to Jesus, so its conclusion is this: "The root metaphor itself in [Luke 12] v. 39 could have come from Jesus but it would have been understood on his lips in a secular sense."<sup>63</sup> What that sense might have been they do not tell us.

3. The parable of the wheat and weeds is, in Matthew, about the last judgment.<sup>64</sup> This is made plain in the allegorical interpretation of Matt 13:36:43: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age . . . ." If one sets aside this allegory, however, other interpretations become possible. Among them is the recent proposal of R. David Kaylor: the parable is "a social critique of the patterns of land tenure developed during the period immediately prior to Jesus' lifetime."<sup>65</sup>

4. The parable of the tenants of the vineyard is about a man who plants a vineyard and then leases it to tenants.<sup>66</sup> Later he sends for his portion of the produce. The tenants ignore his requests and mistreat the messengers. Finally, the owner returns, destroys the tenants, and gives

the vineyard to others. In the canonical gospels, this story is an allegory about faithlessness and judgment, and Christian readers have traditionally understood the householder to stand for God, the tenant farmers to stand for Jewish leaders, the rejection of the servants to stand for the rejection of prophets, etc. Yet some now suppose that these equations were not implicit in the original parable, and in fact that the theological focus may be ecclesiastical overlay. According to Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, for example, "If at the earliest stage of the gospel tradition the parable embedded here was not a riposte to enemies in Jerusalem, it may well have been a warning to landowners expropriating and exporting the produce of the land."<sup>67</sup>

5. Within in Matthean and Lukan contexts, the parable of the hidden talents is filled with transparent religious symbols.<sup>68</sup> The master is Jesus. His slaves represent the church, whose members have received various responsibilities. The master's departure is the departure of the earthly Jesus. The period of the master's absence is the age of the church, his return is the parousia of the Son of man, and the rewards for the good servants stand for heavenly rewards given to the faithful at the great assize whereas the punishment of the evil slave represents those within the church who, through their sins of omission, condemn themselves to eschatological darkness. Scholars have long thought that Jesus, if he authored the parable, must have meant something a bit different; and recently William R. Herzog II has proposed that originally the parable praised the third servant, the one who hides his talent, because he does not participate in the exploitation of the economic system. For Herzog, hearers of this parable might have asked these questions: "How would you react to a whistle-blower? Would a former retainer find a welcome in a peasant village? Or would the former hostilities suffocate even the possibility of a latter-day coalition? Do the people of the land realize the role played by retainers? Do they



understand how their bitter animosity toward them plays into the hands of the ruling elite? Can peasants and rural poor folks realize how their interests can be tied to the very class of people whom they despise?"<sup>69</sup>

6. In Matt 10:26 and Luke 12:2, Jesus says that nothing which is covered up will not be uncovered, and that nothing which is secret will not become known. Most commentators find in these words a somber allusion to the final judgment, when all will come to light. Burton Mack agrees that this is the right reading for the second level of Q. But for the primary level he declares that the saying was far less loaded: it was "general cautionary advice."<sup>70</sup>

7. Often in the gospels Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of man." Traditionally most Christians have understood this in terms of the incarnation: Jesus was not only the Son of God but also a true human being. Until recently most modern scholarship preferred instead to interpret the expression as being either a title from Jewish eschatological expectation (cf. the Son of man 1 Enoch) or an allusion to Daniel 7 and the eschatological vindication of the saints. On both readings the term is full of religious connotations. At present, however, a large body of contemporary scholars has argued that, at least for Jesus himself, the expression may have been nothing more than a common Aramaic idiom, a roundabout way of speaking about oneself.<sup>71</sup> In other words, in and of itself the expression had no theological meaning.

The preceding seven examples, to which it would be easy to add, illustrate a trend. As one would expect in an increasingly secular age, in which transcendent realities are for so many distant or even altogether illusory, there is an increasing number of what may be fairly called secular readings of some gospel texts. This is not to imply that the proponents of those interpretations are not themselves religious, only that they are sometimes forwarding

interpretations that shift the focus away from traditional theological, christological, and eschatological concerns.

Now it is always possible that, just as modernity has in other ways brought us new knowledge about the past, so here too; and I do not wish to dispute the correctness of any of the interpretations just introduced (though indeed I find none of them persuasive). Maybe our secular outlook and the ever-diminishing influence of traditional ecclesiastical readings are helping us to see things others our predecessor were blind to, such as ancient economic realities. I in fact think this is the case. At the same time, one must wonder how often we are once again looking at our own reflections in the bottom of the well of history. Do we see less theology than earlier exegetes because we are today less theological? Do not secular readers make for secular readings? If so, how does this affect the quest of the historical Jesus?

The earliest extant interpretations of the Jesus tradition are all thoroughly religious. This is because the first interpreters were all consumed by thoughts about God, miracles, and eschatology or the afterlife. One good explanation of this circumstance is that Jesus himself was just such a person, a a deeply religious personality who interpreted everything in terms of an unseen world, and that he and the traditions about him attracted like-minded others. We might accordingly do well to ask ourselves to what extent our competence to find Jesus requires an "ability to appreciate a distinctly religious personality,"<sup>72</sup> and to what extent our growing secularity may sometimes constrict that ability.

### **1907-1953**

E. D. Burton, The Life of Christ (1907); William Sanday, The Life of Christ in Recent Research (1907); A. T. Robertson, Epochs in the Life of Christ (1907); James Denney, Jesus and the

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1. Cf. Marcus J. Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. ix ("a third quest is underway"); C. E. Braaten, "Jesus and the Church: An Essay on Ecclesial Hermeneutics," Ex Auditu 10 (1994), pp. 59-71; Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 4; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 10-11; David Wenham, Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 17, 21. The terminology has

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become so widespread that the current Fuller catalogue describes its course, *The Jesus Quest*, as covering "the major trends and developments in the first, second, and third quests for the historical Jesus." Other catalogues feature similar courses with similar descriptions.

2 . Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961 [trans. of Von Reimarus zu Wrede, 1906]).

3 . Eng. trans.: "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SBT 41; London: SCM, 1964), pp. 15-47.

4 . See Stephen Neil and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 397-98, as well as Wright's article, "Jesus, Quest for the Historical," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 3 H-J, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 796-802.

5 . For Wright himself, however, the new quest continues beside the third quest; see "Jesus, Quest for the Historical." According to him, the works of the Jesus Seminar, Burton Mack, and F. Gerald Downing, although they appeared after the publication of books that Wright assigns to the third quest, really belong to the new quest. Contrast Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 4, who declares that "The Jesus Seminar thinks of itself as the vanguard of the 'Third Quest.'"

6 . Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995), pp. 37-40. Already W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), pp. 71-74, uses "no quest" for the period 1906-1953. On p. 78, however, he deconstructs his own category: "Not all scholars suspended the effort to rediscover the Jesus of history. An interest in Jesus as a historical figure continued without interruption, especially within British and American scholarship." See further his discussion of A. M. Hunter, T. W. Manson, V. Taylor, C. H. Dodd, and S. J. Case on pp. 85-89.

7 . "Jesus, Quest for the Historical," p. 798.

8 . Cf. John Reumann, "Jesus and Christology," in Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, eds., *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia/Atlanta: Fortress/Scholars Press, 1989), p. 504. According to Werner Georg Kümmel, *Derißig Jahre Jesusforschung (1950-1980)* (ed. Helmut Merklein; BBB 60; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1985), p. 1, "die Jesusforschung in der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie seit dem Ende des 1. Weltkrieges stark zurückgetreten, freilich keineswegs ganz aufgegeben worden."

9 . For the journals see Bruce M. Metzger, *Index to Periodical Literature on Christ and the Gospels* (NETS 6; Leiden: Brill, 1966).

10 . "The Life of Jesus During the Last Quarter-Century," *JR* 5 (1925), p. 568. He was referring primarily to attempts to understand Jesus in the light source criticism, that is, the priority of Mark and the existence of Q. On p. 575 he writes: "historical inquiry still has much to do upon the subject

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of the life and teaching of Jesus."

11 . "Recent Lives of Jesus," HTR 27 (1934), pp. 1, 2.

12 . The Search for the Real Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), pp. 281-84, 287

13 . In Edwin Prince Booth, ed., New Testament Studies: Critical Essays in New Testament Interpretation, with Special Reference to the Meaning and Words of Jesus (New York/Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1942), pp. 42-69 (quotation from p. 43).

14 . Philadelphia: Westminster. On p. 14 Hunter expressed his own confidence about the direction of research: "The problems are not all solved, but many of them are; and the scholarship of the last two or three decades, by its patient research on many aspects of Christ's Life and Teaching, has gradually been accumulating materials for a worthier and truer portrait . . . ."

15 . Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey, The Riddle of the New Testament (London: Faber & Faber, 1931), p. 171.

16 . "The Life of Christ in the Twentieth Century," ExpT 61 (1950), p. 235. Cf. Vincent Taylor, "Is It Possible to Write a Life of Christ?," ExpT 52 (1941), p. 60: "the veritable spate of attempts to delineate the Life of Jesus has given place to a slow trickle." In an article with the same title in ExpT 53 (1942), pp. 248-51, T. W. Manson argued that we cannot produce a biography of Jesus, not even a complete narrative of the ministry, only "some kind of outline of the events that led up to the Cross" (p. 251).

17 . So rightly John Reumann, "'Lives of Jesus' During the Great Quest for the Historical Jesus," Indian Journal of Theology 23 (1974), pp. 33-59.

18 . For English resistance see esp. Vincent Taylor, "Is It Possible to Write a Life of Christ?," pp. 59-62.

19 . D. T. Rowlinson, "The Continuing Quest of the Historical Jesus," p. 61, quoting Mary Ely Lyman. English-speaking presentations of form-criticism generally eschewed what they saw as the unnecessary "skepticism" of German practitioners. See e.g. B. S. Easton, The Gospel before the Gospels (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928); F. C. Grant, The Growth of the Gospels (Nashville: Abingdon, 1933); Donald W. Riddle, The Gospels: Their Origin and Growth (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939); Vincent Taylor, The Formation of the Gospel Tradition (London: Macmillan, 1933). The skepticism famously expressed by R. H. Lightfoot in History and Interpretation in the Gospels (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.) was exceptional.

20 . Allan Barr, "Bultmann's Estimate of Jesus," SJT 7 (1954), pp. 337-52, is in part a straightforward presentation of what Bultmann thought, the assumption being that mid-1950s readers of the Scottish Journal of Theology still had no clear idea on the subject. One should remember that Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate, with Bultmann's essay, "New Testament and

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Mythology," was translated into English only in 1953 (London: SPCK), and that The History of the Synoptic Tradition (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) was not translated until ten years later. Of course the work of Martin Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934), had appeared long before in English, but it was not so skeptical, and it had no theological edge.

21 . Jesus and Christian Origins: A Commentary on Modern Viewpoints (New York: Oxford University, 1964), p. 78.

22 . Christian Origins and Judaism (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1962), pp. 1-17.

23 . Martin Kähler, The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964). In the preface to this edition Paul Tillich remarks on the "Kähler revival that is taking place."

24 . SBT 25; London: SCM, 1959, p. 9. On the French quest through Goguel see Jean G. H. Hoffmann, Les vies de Jesus et le Jesus de l'histoire (ACNU 17; Paris: Messageries Evangeliques, 1947).

25 . Cf. Otto A. Piper, "Das Problem des Lebens Jesu seit Schweitzer," in Werner Foerster, ed., Verbum Dei manet in Aeternum: Eine Festschrift für Prof. D. Otto Schmitz (Witten: Luther, 1953), p. 73, remarking on the great disparity between the number of German books on Jesus and those written in English.

26 . Robinson, New Quest, p. 12. Others have given "new quest" a much broader sense, so that it includes all the critical study of Jesus after Käsemann's lecture. This only confuses matters.

27 . Perhaps its greatest legacy is its emphasis that Jesus' conduct was the context for his speech: this redressed an earlier imbalance, an almost exclusive focus upon Jesus' words. See esp. Ernst Fuchs, Studies of the Historical Jesus (SBT 42; London: SCM, 1964). Particularly important to subsequent discussion has been the significance of Jesus' table-fellowship.

28 . Joachim Jeremias Die Gleichnisse Jesu (Zürich: Zwingli, 1947); the English translation, The Parables of Jesus (3rd. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), follows the text of the 8th German edition (1970); idem, Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949); the Eng. trans., The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (London: SCM, 1966), is based upon the 3rd German edition (1960); C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961); T. W. Manson, The Sayings of Jesus (London: SCM, 1949).

29 . Alan Kirk, The Composition of the Sayings Source: Genre, Synchrony, and Wisdom Redaction in Q (NovTSup 91; Leiden/Boston/Köln, 1998), p. 11, n. 47.

30 . The Jesus Tradition in Q (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Intl., 1997).

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31 . Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 92. It seems to me that while Perrin himself is sometimes classified as a new quester, a careful reading of his work shows the dominating influence and discussion partner to be, despite much disagreement, Jeremias.

32 . Cf. James H. Charlesworth, "Christian Origins and Jesus Research," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring Jesus' Place in Early Judaism (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 78: "Jesus research"--Charlesworth's name for what has gone on since the waning of the new quest--"commenced around 1980."

33 . Unless one just puts everything between 1953 and 1980 under the rubric, "new quest." But that is to throw away the original definition.

34 . Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976 [trans. of the 2nd Swedish edition, 1974]). Note also the surveys in Kümmel, Dreißig Jahre Jesusforschung.

35 . See further Etienne Trocmé, Jesus as Seen by His Contemporaries (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), pp. 1-13.

36 . E.g. Alfred Resch, Agrapaha: Aussercanonische Evangelienfragmente (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1889); James H. Ropes, Die Sprüche Jesus, die in den kanonischen Evangelien nicht überliefert sind (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896); E. Klostermann, Apocrypha 2. Evangelien (Bonn: Marcus und Weber, 1929); J. Jeremias, Unbekannte Jesuworte (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1948).

37 . For some of the literature on Thomas published before 1980 see Craig A. Evans, Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography (NTTS 24; Leiden/New York/Köln, 1996), pp. 260-70.

38 . So Marcus Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship , pp. 7-9.

39 . "Jesus, Quest for the Historical," p. 800.

40 . See W. D. Davies, Christian Engagements with Judaism (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Intl., 1999), pp. 000-00.

41 . See the helpful overview of Donald Hagner, The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

42 . "The Gospel according to the Jesus Seminar," Religion 25 (1995), p. 320.

43 . See e.g. Robert W. Funk, Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

44 . Charlesworth, "Christian Origins and Jesus Research," pp. 82-83, fails to mention this crucial factor when trying to explain the recent "explosion of interest" in the historical Jesus. If volume of



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publication is our criterion, then there has been an explosion of interest in just about every subject under the sun. One should keep in mind how the attendance, number of lecturers, and number of publishers at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature have exploded over the last three decades.

45 . John Riches, Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism (New York: Seabury, 1982), pp. 1-19.

46 . "Historical Jesus, Quest of," p. 337.

47 . Quote Wright as agreeing here.

48 . I will admit, however, that the Jesus Seminar may be perceived as a sort of "school."

49 . This seems to me applicable to Wright, "Jesus, Quest for the Historical." He artificially locates his discussion of Joachim Jeremias, Edward Schillebeekx, the Jesus Seminar, Burton Mack, and F.Gerald Downing under the heading of the new quest. But Jeremias, who was already writing books and articles on Jesus in the 20s and 30s and 40s, is much more plausibly thought of as continuing either the old quest (cf. p. 799 of Wright) or Schweitzer's paradigm than as taking up the new quest; and any taxonomy that links Jeremias with Mack is jarring indeed. Wright's almost total neglect of Jeremias, arguably this century's most important and influential quester for Jesus, in his survey of research in Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 3-124, may also hint at something amiss.

50 . Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 25, admits that scholarship does not fall into rigid periods, and further that his categories are just "heuristic aids to help us grasp currents of thought" (cf. p. 75, n. 215). I find this candid confession of nominalism more helpful than his "heuristic aids."

51 . "Jesus, Quest for the Historical," p. 800.

52 . This is a strange assertion; once more everything is being read through Bultmann and the skepticism of a later time.

53 . "Historical Jesus, Quest of," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 337.

54 . Wright, "Jesus, Quest for the Historical," p. 800. Wright nonetheless essays the task.

55 . William R. Telford, "Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus," in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the Current State of Research (NTTS 19; Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 57-58. He lists the following: (a) historical rather than theological orientation; (b) attention to broader questions than the historicity of individual pericopae; (c) confidence in the possibility of a comprehensive account of Jesus' ministry; (d) less emphasis upon traditio-critical analyses of sayings; (e) less reliance upon form criticism and the criterion of dissimilarity; (f) emphasis upon placing Jesus in a wider context; (g) interdisciplinary

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openness. In fairness to Telford, he goes on to observe that in view of the lack of uniformity in methodologies and results it would nonetheless "be unwise to claim at this stage" that the trends observed constitute the basis of a third quest. "Time will tell" (p. 60).

56 . (b) - (e) marked the earlier conservative British tradition, and (f) is equally true of the works of Jeremias and Rudolf Otto.

57 . (a), for instance, does not apply to the writings of Borg or N. T. Wright, and the works of John P. Meyer and Ed Sanders do not reflect much interdisciplinary interest (g).

58 . For examples of this sort of typology see Irvin W. Batdorf, "Interpreting Jesus since Bultmann: Selected Paradigms and their Hermeneutic Matrix," in Kent Harold Richards, ed., Society of Biblical Literature 1984 Seminar Papers (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 187-215; John Wick Bowman, Which Jesus? (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); and Reumann, "Great Quest."

59 . Matt 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8; Gos. Thom. 9.

60 . Charles W. Hedrick, Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus (Peabody, MA, 1994), p. 177.

61 . Ibid., p. 185.

62 . Matt 24:43-44 and Luke 12:39-40 (Q); cf. Gos. Thom. 21 and 1 Thess 5:2-6.

63 . Robert Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 342. On p. 287 Jesus is called a "secular sage" who used "secular proverbs," and on p. 201 we read that in debate his "responses were more secular than legal in character."

64 . Matt 13:24-30; cf. Gos. Thom. 57.

65 . R. David Kaylor, Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), p. 143.

66 . Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19; Gos. Thom. 65-66.

67 . B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 164. An economic interpretation also appears in J. D. Hester, "Socio-Rhetorical Criticism and the Parable of the Tenants," JSNT 45 (1992), pp. 27-57.

68 . Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27.

69 . William R. Herzog II, Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), pp. 167-68.

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70 . Burton Mack, The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 166.

71 . See e.g. Douglas R. A. Hare, The Son of Man Tradition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

72 . Rowlinson, "The Continuing Quest of the Historical Jesus," p. 42.