I. What is the Quest for the Historical Jesus?

A. The adjective and the quest. I suspect you don’t generally add the adjective historical to people’s names, do you? We’re unlikely to talk about the historical Barack Obama or the historical Justin Verlander. If we did talk this way, we’d give the impression that we were trying to make a distinction. We’d give the impression we were trying to distinguish between a historical Justin Verlander and a non-historical one—whatever that even means. Well, this is precisely what the adjective often implies when it is appended to Jesus. It’s meant to distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of orthodox Christianity. Perhaps you’ve heard it put like this: there’s the historical Jesus and then there’s the Christ of faith.\(^1\) The subtext of all this is, of course, that there’s quite a bit of difference between the two—otherwise, the adjective wouldn’t be necessary.

It’s the kind of difference, e.g., one finds sensationalized in Dan Brown’s fascinating and error-filled book The DaVinci Code. According to Brown’s narrative, the church covered up the real Jesus—the one who was married, with children, and who had no pretensions of divinity—and has done so for one reason: power. Perhaps you remember this little bit of exposition given by the character Sir Leigh Teabing (played in the movie by the masterful, Ian McKellan):

The Sangreal documents simply tell the other side of the Christ story. . . . Eyewitness accounts of the Sangreal treasure describe it as being carried in four enormous trunks. In those trunks are reputed to be the Purist Documents—thousands of pages of unaltered, pre-Constantine documents, written by the early followers of Jesus, revering Him as a wholly human teacher and prophet.\(^2\)

Of course, not everyone using the adjective is quite as skeptical (much less, interesting) as Brown, but many are. In fact, on the whole, the quest for the historical Jesus began as an attempt to do away with orthodox Christianity as we know it. One of its most famous chroniclers puts it this way,

It was not so much hate of the Person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround Him, and with which He had in fact been surrounded. [The questers] were eager to picture Him as truly and purely human, to strip from Him the

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\(^1\) This way of putting things owes to Martin Kähler, The So-Called Historical Jesus and The Historic Biblical Christ (trans. Carl E. Braaten; Fortress Texts in Modern Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

\(^2\) Dan Brown, The DaVinci Code (Doubleday, 2003), 56. Cf. the similar view in Bart Ehrman’s recent work: “The winners chose which records of the affair to keep and decided how to tell the history of the conflict. Only in modern times have the voices of the losers begun to be heard with any kind of clarity” (Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and The Faiths We Never Knew [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 161).
robes of splendour with which He had been appareled, and clothe Him once more with
the coarse garments in which He had walked in Galilee.  

B. A key question and survey. At this point, I suspect I may have just confirmed your
doubts about coming to this session in the first place. After all, what’s the use of this line of
study when it has such ignominious roots? Well, if you think I’m going to talk about the quest
only to turn around and answer my second question—should I care?—negatively, suggesting
you can do without the quest, you’d better sit tight. Let me briefly anticipate why—I’ll have
more to say about all this later on. The question the quest asks is massively important.
Fundamentally, it asks: what does history have to do with faith? We need not ask it for the same
reasons or, for that matter, expect the same results, but, I would argue, we must ask it. And,
because we must, there’s profit to be gained by tracing others’ attempts to answer it. (You’ve
heard of plundering the Egyptians?)

These attempts, as the narrative usually goes, can be divided into four periods—though
periods isn’t quite the right word considering the periods don’t easily lend themselves to neat
chronological sequence. In any case, this is how the story is normally told and who am I to buck
the reigning historiography. 

1. The First Quest. We’ll begin with H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768), whose
Fragments were published only posthumously (1774–78)—by G. E. Lessing, a name, I don’t
doubt, that some of you are familiar with (remember his “ugly ditch”). In the Fragments
Reimarus sought to show that the Christianity of his day (i.e., continental Protestantism) was a
ruse, resting on a Jesus created by the earliest Christians. The “real” Jesus, according to

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3 Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to
the motive behind many of the early, liberal lives in “Quests for the historical Jesus,” in The Cambridge Companion
to Jesus (ed. Markus Bockmuehl; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 144.

4 N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (vol. 2; Christian Origins and the Question of God;
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 16–17; see also Wright’s note about the quest’s “anxious demand for relevance”
on 81; also 117, 122.

5 See, e.g., Craig Blomberg’s note of introduction to form, source and redaction criticism in Jesus and the

6 See, e.g., Paget, “Quests for the historical Jesus,” 148–49.

7 James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus: An Introduction,” in The
Historical Jesus: Five Views (ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009),
11. For an alternative historiography, see the “four tendencies” traced in Scot McKnight, “Jesus of Nazareth,” in The
Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research (ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne; Grand
Rapids: Baker, 2004), 149-76; cf. also, more broadly, the scheme in Robert W. Yarbrough, The Salvation Historical
Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology (History of Biblical Interpretation Series, 2; Leiden,
The Netherlands: Deo Publishing, 2004) (Kantian v. Salvation-historical [or, Realism]) with the one presented in
Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs (2nd ed.;

8 On the history of the ‘quest’ prior to Reimarus, see Paget, “Quests for the historical Jesus,” 139–41.
Reimarus, was a failed Jewish reformer, who’d met his end on a Roman cross just outside Jerusalem. Instead of cashing in their revolutionary hopes, the disciples decided rather to steal Jesus’ body, invent the story of his resurrection, cast Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, and, as a result (and with considerable help from Paul) to found the early Church. Reimarus’s “aim,” as Wright notes, “seems to have been to destroy Christianity (as he knew it) at its root, by showing that it rested on historical distortion or fantasy.”

The next major player in the narrative is D. F. Strauss (1808–74). His *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835), was an attempt both to undercut orthodoxy as he knew it and to contemporize another version of Jesus in its place. The modern man simply had no place for the supernatural, to say nothing of the apocalyptic. The scientific method had solved too many mysteries for things to be otherwise; its impressive track record made Christianity’s supernatural claims seem quaintly primitive. To be relevant, Christianity needed to look for alternative explanations for Jesus’ life and esp. deeds. To bridge the gap between the first century and his own, Strauss took an original—and, as it turned out, influential —line, introducing not more rationalistic explanations of the “less scientific” bits of the NT (as, e.g., H. E. G. Paulus had

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9 Dunn says Reimarus was the first to “systematically” pose the question: what was Jesus’ aim as distinct from that of subsequent Christian claims regarding Jesus?” (James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* [vol. 1; Christianity in the Making; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003], 31). Beilby and Eddy note the significance of Reimarus’s observation here: “[T]he firm line drawn by Reimarus between the Jesus of history and the Christ figure of the Gospels has remained an unquestioned presupposition for many scholars throughout the quest” (“The Quest for the Historical Jesus,” 13).


12 *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 16; cf. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 4, also 15. Schweitzer notes further, “The sole argument which could save the credit of Christianity,” for Reimarus, at least, “would be a proof that the Parousia had really taken place at the time for which it was announced; and obviously no such proof can be produced” (22).

13 William Baird calls Strauss’s work “the most revolutionary religious document written since Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses” (*History of New Testament Research* [vol. 1: From Deism to Tübingen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 246).

14 Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 87, 90; cf. Brown, who talks about Strauss trying “to rescue the underlying truth of the Christian faith” at the end of his work (“Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 328), an effort Harrisville and Sundberg describe as “miniscule” (93). Harrisville and Sundberg also relate the sad, if, perhaps, legendary, account of the effects of Strauss’s work on his English translator, the novelist George Eliot: “[w]hen George Eliot began her translation of *The Life of Jesus*, she kept her rosary nearby. When the work was completed, the rosary had disappeared” (103).

done) but rather a new category called myth. Strauss argued that much of what the Gospels record did not literally happen; rather—and here he and Reimarus walk together—the stories were invented (this time “unconsciously”) by the earliest Christians in an attempt to relay the true significance of Jesus’ life. Thus to uncover the historical Jesus, the Gospels must be demythologized. (You can imagine how subjective the criteria for such work must be.) For his labors Strauss lost his post at Tübingen.

Next in line—after a handful of other notables (e.g., Ernst Renan, H. J. Holtzmann, Johannes Weiss)—was William Wrede (1859–1906). His work, entitled The Messianic Secret (1901), once more gave credit to the disciples for creating Christianity’s Jesus. Wrede suggested that the messianic secret motif in Mark—you know, the places where Jesus tells his disciples to keep his true identity mum (Mark 1:23–25, 34, 43–44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30)—was invented by the evangelist. The real Jesus didn’t think he was the messiah; credit for this, rather, goes to Mark. Now what made Wrede’s portrait especially devastating was that until that point Mark’s gospel had been seen as the clearest window to the historical Jesus—the one least tainted by early, hagiographic tendencies. (In fact, it turns out, the theory of Markan priority—one that I find convincing—actually owed to the attempt to find historical bedrock for Jesus studies amidst all this skepticism.) Thus, after Wrede, the only Jesus left to us was, as Wright notes, “a Galilean teacher or prophet who did and said some striking things and was eventually executed,” which is to say, not a whole lot. Wrede’s radical skepticism sounded the death-knell for the scores of liberal scholars who wished to find in Mark, at least, an unadorned, historical Jesus capable of funding their particular dogmas (i.e., a timeless ethic of brotherly love and the

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16 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 32; Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus, 352.

17 Paget, “Quests for the historical Jesus,” 143.

18 Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 328; for an e.g. see Harrisville and Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture, 92–93. Specifically, these stories were invented by disciples who “perceived Jesus . . . as Messiah and as therefore fulfilling the expectations for the Messiah then current, albeit modified by the impression left upon [them] by Jesus’ personal character, actions, and fate. In Strauss, however, this idea [i.e., this messianic idea] is transposed into the ideal of God-manhood which transcends the particularity of Christ. It was that ideal which really mattered for Strauss; the historical figure as such was no longer of importance” (Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 33).

19 Wright, Who Was Jesus?, 3; also Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 18; for a slightly different story, see Harrisville and Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture, 89, 93. Schweitzer eulogizes Strauss’s fate thusly: “In order to understand Strauss one must love him. He was not the greatest, and not the deepest, of theologians, but he was the most absolutely sincere. His insight and his errors were alike the insight and the errors of a prophet. And he has a prophet’s fate. Disappointment and suffering gave his life its consecration. It unrolls itself before us like a tragedy, in which, in the end, the gloom is lightened by the mild radiance which shines forth from the nobility of the sufferer” (The Quest of the Historical Jesus, 68).

20 Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, 339; also Bock, Studying the Historical Jesus, 144; Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus, 352; Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 50.

21 Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus, 352.

22 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 43–45; Wright, Who Was Jesus?, 4; Beilby and Eddy, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus,” 18.

23 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 20.
fatherhood of God). Wrede’s *Secret* put a giant question mark over the signpost that had pointed so many scholars in this direction.

If Wrede rung the death knell, then Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) put the nail in the coffin. Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906)—a book written before he’d turned thirty—proved in the devastating sort of way that the previous century’s ‘lives’—he reviewed some 251 of them—had drawn portraits of Jesus that made him look very much like a 19th century European, which, of course, is passing strange, since he was a 1st century Jew. The tools used to separate Jesus off from ecclesiastical tradition, Schweitzer complained, were too easily used to support the author’s own biases.

Schweitzer’s own positive proposal still drove a wedge between the real Jesus and the Gospels—and, thus, orthodoxy’s—Jesus, though not quite in the same place as the authors he’d critiqued. Rather he attributed far more to Jesus than had others before him, particularly the heroic, if finally erroneous, belief that the world was soon to come to an apocalyptic end (see, e.g., Matt 10:23). Despite all this, Schweitzer still thought Jesus had contemporary relevance. It certainly wasn’t too be found in Jesus’ view of history or, much less, in the way the disciples tried to rescue the Jesus story. Rather, it was to be found in Jesus’ own, inspiring personality, he was willing to give his life to make the world a better place—which, it turned out, looked quite a bit like Schweitzer’s own life’s story.

2. The No Quest. The accuracy of calling the post-Schweitzerian epoch the era of the “no quest” is vigorously debated, since it is, technically speaking, not true. It does, however, represent the approach to the question of faith and history taken by the era’s dominate figure: the towering German Neutestamentler Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976). Bultmann accepted Reimarus’s and, esp., Wrede’s thorough-going skepticism—the church’s Jesus is the Gospels’ (read: created) Jesus and, like his skeptical predecessors, admitted that we can know

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26 See Albert Schweitzer, “Introduction to Third Edition,” appended to the third ed. of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* but not always found in subsequent reprints. See the ed. published by Adam & Charles (1954), viii.

27 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 19. See Schweitzer’s now-famous summary: “Soon after comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign” (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 370–71).


very little about the real Jesus. The Jesus actually found in the tradition, was—this time, like Schweitzer’s—thoroughly apocalyptic, which, therefore, meant that he’d need to be demythologized before any of his teachings could be of any real use to the modern man. (One need not listen too carefully here to pick up echoes of D. F. Strauss.)

Bultmann, however, didn’t see any of this as all that troubling. Christianity didn’t stand to lose all that much (anything?) from playing the skeptics game, since Christianity didn’t depend on historical events anyways. Rather, it depended on the traditions Jesus’ teaching had shaped. In other words, as Keener notes, “History could not affect Jesus’ existential message.” In fact, for Bultmann, this is how things had to be: were Christianity dependent on historical events instead of ideas, then it’d be possible to prove Christianity, which would imply that faith could be based on works, not grace. (I wonder, at least, how ideas can be communicated without historical events, but that probably just means I’ve not yet understood Bultmann.) The upshot of all this was that the Gospels were given new importance; they

30 Wright, Who Was Jesus?, 7; Bock, Studying the Historical Jesus, 144. See, e.g., Rudolph Bultmann, Jesus and the Word (New York: Scribner's, 1934), 14: “I do think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.” What we can know about Jesus turned out to comprise some twenty-five or so sayings of his (for this observation, along with the citation, see Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 76).


33 For a similar observation, see Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 334; Wenham and Walton, Exploring the New Testament, 129. For a helpful chart noting other influences on Bultmann’s thought, see Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus, 354.


37 I’m encouraged by the title to Karl Barth’s essay on Bultmann’s idea of mythology: Rudolph Bultmann: Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen (trans. “an attempt to understand him”).
weren’t simply a husk to be removed to find Jesus. Rather, they tell us of that one thing that is of utmost importance—early Christian faith, something that could be studied sufficiently thoroughly if the Sitz im Leben (situation in life) of each individual tradition could be uncovered (meet form criticism).38 It should not be too surprising that what Bultmann discovered of the early Christians’ faith was a near-total disregard for the Jesus of history, which Bultmann took as a blessing on his own suspicions about history’s value.39 Bultmann, thus, stands under Schweitzer’s condemnation; his Jesus looks too autobiographical—too much like a Marburg, neo-Kantian.40 And, more ominously, his historical skepticism left Jesus untethered to history and thus able to be contemporized in other, less benign ways.41

3. The New Quest. To the outside observer, the spell of Bultmann’s skepticism looked as it had been finally broken by a lecture given in 1953 by one of his former students, Ernst Käsemann, entitled, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus.” In it Käsemann insisted that the Gospels preserved quite a bit more about the historical Jesus than Bultmann had thought42

38 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 22–23. In another place, Wright helpfully illustrates the practice and benefits of this sort of criticism.

There are few things more frustrating than having to listen—as one sometimes does with a child, or a drunk—to a story that remains unshaped and unsorted, with the salient facts that might have made the tale worth telling being hidden behind the fog of irrelevant information and comment. But there are different sorts of shaping. When my wife and I tell our children the story of their births, as we sometimes do on their birthdays, we naturally minimize the medical details, and highlight the sense of parental excitement, the delight at discovering a new member of the family, that accompanied the event. The story often concludes by retelling a remark made by one of us at the time, or by a nurse in the hospital, epitomizing the feelings of those present. If, however, we tell the same story to a doctor, especially if there is concern about the present health of the child, we select different information, highlight different things. Our feelings at the time are of little significance; whether the child began to breathe at the appropriate moment is far more important. It would thus be possible in principle to deduce, from the form of the story (its emphases, highlights, and perhaps concluding quotations), the context and purpose in and for which it was being told (*The New Testament and the People of God* [vol. 1; Christian Origins and the Question of God; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 419; on the application of this sort of criticism to the Gospels, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* [2nd ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007], 50–51).

On an entirely different note, Scot McKnight makes the interesting observation that the success of narrative criticism is directly linked to Bultmann’s (and Troeltsch’s and Kähler’s) marginalization of history (“Jesus of Nazareth,” 157).


40 For this designation, see Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy?*, 287–93.

41 One of the devastating results of Bultmann’s historical skepticism was that it produced a climate in which German Christians could imagine a Jesus who would endorse the Third Reich’s agenda (cf. N. T. Wright, “No, We Need History,” *Christianity Today*, April 2010, 28; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 23; Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 8; Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 8, incl. n. 70 [400]; McKnight, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 170–71; cf. also Wright’s warning (?) about similar tendencies among new questers [*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 79, n. 233]).
and, moreover, that this history was the only thing that kept Jesus’ biographies—and Christian faith—from the kind of subjectivity Schweitzer had warned against, the kind, e.g., that created, with devastating results, the sort of un-Jewish Jesus of the Reich church. The quest was thus revived. Unfortunately, these new questers failed to shed their mentor’s controlling hypothesis about early Christianity, which is to say, his thorough-going skepticism toward the Gospels. This was the hypothesis that suggested that the historical Jesus was simply a teacher of timeless principles and that it was the early church which was responsible for most everything else, not least the distinctly Jewish material. Thus, despite its aura of objectivity—i.e., its attention to method and criteria—the quest’s results were built in from the beginning, as was, once more, a good measure of subjectivity. As Wright notes,

> Once you doubt everything in the story, and postulate a chain of events by which someone might have taken it upon themselves to invent such a narrative from scratch, all things are possible.

Thus, the Jesuses created by the new questers—and that continue to be produced by their heirs (e.g., the Jesus Seminar [1985–])—are open to the same critique as those catalogued by Schweitzer.

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42 Ben Witherington, III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 11; Paget, “Quests for the historical Jesus,” 146. Cf. also Dunn’s summary: “[T]he Gospels are also kerygma, documents of the church’s faith, but they did not simply repeat the message that Jesus had lived and died; rather, they were considerably concerned with the what of the pre-Easter history of Jesus—a history, of course, seen from the standpoint of faith, but the history of Jesus nonetheless” (*Jesus Remembered*, 79).

43 Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 79: “Failure to appreciate the historical particularity of the man from Nazareth, to whom the eschatological event was bound, ran the danger of dissolving the event itself into a myth, the danger of docetism. ‘To cleave firmly to history is one way of giving expression to the extra nos of salvation.’” See, e.g., John Meier’s description of Althaus’ similar conclusion (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*; The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 28). Cf. also Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 336; Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 246.

44 See n. 41 above.


47 See Wright’s summaries of Crossan’s and Mack’s work in *Who Was Jesus?*, 10–12 and *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 37, 45, 50–51, 64; cf. also 81. This tendency is seen esp. in N. Perrin’s criterion of dissimilarity, a criterion whose working assumption is that the historical Jesus is different than the Jesus of the Gospels (Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 81–81; for Bultmann’s similar assumption, see 77). On this tendency, see also Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 151; Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 17–18; also Paget, “Quests for the historical Jesus,” 147: “The ‘de-Judaisation’ of Jesus . . . reached its zenith in the occasional assertion that Jesus had not been born a Jew.”

48 See, e.g., Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 9.

49 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 61; cf. also 81.

50 Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 336; cf. also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 39.
4. The Third Quest. With the new quest still sputtering along, a number of scholars, working largely-independently and spurred on by new light shed on Jesus’ first-century context (via, e.g., the finally published DSS), 51 began what N. T. Wright has called the third quest for the historical Jesus. 52 Questers in this line include Wright himself, along with a number of other scholars, many of whom you’re probably familiar with: E. P. Sanders, 53 Ben F. Meyer, Anthony Harvey, Ben Witherington, Darrell Bock, Scot McKnight, James D. G. Dunn. 54 The quest’s fundamental observation and, thus, distinction, is this: the historical Jesus must be a demonstrably-Jewish Jesus or, to put it sharply, he must be crucifiably-Jewish; 55 otherwise, we’ll be unable to explain some of the truly givens of Jesus research, e.g., his crucifixion under the title “King of the Jews.” Meier illustrates this approach with his criterion of Jesus’ rejection and execution.

The criterion of Jesus’ rejection and execution . . . directs our attention to the historical fact that Jesus met a violent end at the hands of Jewish and Roman officials and then asks us what historical words and deeds of Jesus can explain his trial and crucifixion as ‘King of the Jews.’ . . . A tweedy poetaster—and here he’s got in mind the Jesus seminar’s Jesus—[who spent his time spinning out parables and Japanese koans, a literary aesthete who toyed with 1st century deconstructionism, or a bland Jesus who simply told people to look at the lilies of the field—such a Jesus would threaten no one . . . . A Jesus whose words and deeds would not alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus. 56 That Jesus must be demonstrably-Jewish seems like a painfully obvious observation; its hiddenness can be explained only by a persistent assumption, running right back to the beginning of the quest, that Jesus could not be relevant and still keep his Jewishness. 57 And, moreover, it


53 Dunn, e.g., thinks Sanders’ Jesus and Judaism (1985) began the third quest (Jesus Remembered, 89).

54 See Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 84; Bock, Studying the Historical Jesus, 148–49, incl. n. 25.

55 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 85; Wright, “No, We Need History,” 27; Neill and Wright, The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986, 398; see also G. B. Caird, New Testament Theology (ed. L. D. Hurst; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 351–59. Moreover, note Brown’s criticism of the new quest: “For all its stress on history, it remained curiously indifferent to the world of first-century Judaism as known from Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls . . . and rabbinic literature . . . . To those engaged in the New Quest the proclamation of the cross was the pivotal event which linked existence with the historical Jesus. By positing the crucifixion of Jesus as a fact, docetism was averted. But little attention was paid to the question Why exactly was Jesus crucified? . . . To exclude the close connection between religion, theology, politics, sociology and economics as interrelated factors in answering this question now looks curiously unhistorical and short-sighted” (“Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 337, emphasis added).

56 Meier, A Marginal Jew, 1:177. Meier’s criterion is similar to one of the five questions, Wright insists, that all scholars must be able to answer if they’re going to write about Jesus as historians (Jesus and the Victory of God, 89–113).

57 See, e.g., Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 85; also 117, 659; cf. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 86–87; Wenham and Walton, Exploring the New Testament, 129; also Harrisville and Sundberg, The Bible in Modern
appears that this assumption was far too often accompanied by an implicit and pernicious
tendency toward anti-Semitism.58

Added to the third quest’s insistence on Jesus’ Jewishness is the equally-obvious
insistence that Christianity was decisively shaped by this Jewish Jesus, not simply by his early,
creative disciples.59 The upshot of all this: Jesus, not his disciples, is the one given credit for the
apocalyptic and, thus, Jewish elements in the Gospels.60 This material wasn’t simply added in by
a later generation trying to give Jesus a worldview, much less a significance, he wouldn’t have
claimed for himself. Overall, then, the third questers show far less cynicism toward the Gospels
(at least the Synoptics61) and, in many cases, toward traditional faith.62 Reimarus’s turn to
history in order to turn away from orthodoxy has turned against itself.63 (Is this any surprise to
those of us who believe the orthodox story?)

Culture, 218–19. See also Brown’s comment about J. Weiss: “[H]is research showed that, though it might be
unacceptable to the modern mind, Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom was definitely eschatological” (“Historical
Jesus, Quest of,” 331). In other place, Wright signals that the same tension (i.e., how does one contemporize an
apocalyptic Jesus) was part of Bultmann’s project: “Once he [Schweitzer] had thrown out the old liberal portraits of
Jesus, and hung up instead his strange (Nietzschean?) sketch of an apocalyptic hero, where could one turn if one
wished to read the New Testament as in any way normative for contemporary Christianity? Only, it seems, to the
earliest church. So Bultmann focused his attention on the primitive kerygmatic community, seeking there the vibrant
faith that would serve as a model and inspiration for modern Christians” (The New Testament and the People of
God, 342). Interestingly, Nicholas Perrin raises the question about Wright’s own work, wondering if his very Jewish
Jesus can be contemporized and provide ethical direction for modern Christians (“Jesus’ Eschatology and Kingdom
Ethics: Ever the Twain Shall Meet,” in Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T.
Wright [ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2011], 92-112). Wright’s own
essay on Jesus in the book (“Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church?,” in Jesus,
Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2011], 115-58), along with his After You Believe: Why Christian Character
Matters (New York: HarperOne, 2010), illustrate how Wright brings the two worlds together.

58 James D. G. Dunn, “Remembering Jesus: How the Quest for the Historical Jesus Lost Its Way,” in The
Historical Jesus: Five Views (ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009),
217; also Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 87–88; McKnight, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 170–71.

59 Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus, 360. This reminds me of the conclusion C. H. Dodd reaches after
exploring the rich exegetical traditions evidenced in the New Testament: “This is a piece of genuinely creative
thinking. Who was responsible for it? The early Church, we are accustomed to say, and perhaps we can safely say
no more. But creative thinking is rarely done by committees, useful as they may be for systematizing the fresh ideas
of individual thinkers, and for stimulating them to further thought. It is individual minds that originate. Whose was
the originating mind here? . . . To account for the beginning of this most original and fruitful process of rethinking
the Old Testament we found need to postulate a creative mind. The Gospels offer us one. Are we compelled to reject
10).

60 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 87.

61 On the much-disputed issue of John’s historical reliability, there’s no surer guide than Craig Blomberg.
See his The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues & Commentary (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity,
2001).

62 Bock, Studying the Historical Jesus, 147–48; Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 87; Wenham and
C. question and answer(s). Before we move beyond this survey and to the “pay dirt” of our final question, let me try to sort through all this history by surfacing what I, at least, see as the quest’s three basic—and very much related—answers to the question noted initially—i.e., *what does history have to do with faith*? The quest says, sometimes simultaneously,

- that *history* proves that *faith*—at least traditionally conceived—is false (enter Reimarus, Strauss, Wrede, et al.). This one, however, often comes with a “bonus”: too bad for historical Christianity, but, do not fear, the real Jesus still has some relevance for modern man (enter, esp., Strauss, Schweitzer, also Bultmann).

- that *faith*—this time in the sense of dependence—can, or rather, *should* exist independently from historical investigation (enter Bultmann and many of his heirs).

- that *history* is not antagonistic to *faith*, traditionally conceived, even though it often has a necessary *refining* effect (enter many in the third quest).

II. Why Should I care about the Quest?

Once more: the question of faith and history stands at the center of the quest. And, as I noted initially, even though we need not ask it for the same reasons or expect the same answers, we must ask it. Here let me try to explain why. Further, let me say here why I think there’s profit to be gained from tracing the quest’s various answers. Presently, then, we’ll ask and answer two questions: (1) why should I care about the quest’s question and (2) why should I care about the quest’s answers. We’ll take them in that order.

A. Why should I care about the Quest’s question? Put simply: because Christianity does. And it does in two, very much related ways. Christianity is, first, nothing less than—though perhaps it’s slightly more than—an *interpretation* of *history*, that is to say, Christianity, fundamentally, is an *interpretation* of historical events. Thus, Bultmann and co. notwithstanding, the incarnation, 64 to say nothing of the *actual* concerns of the NT authors, 65 does away with any of the more radical divisions between faith and history produced by the quest. What this means is that Christianity isn’t simply a body of ideas or a philosophy of life, it’s an *explanation* of historical data. (This is, in fact, what sets it apart from most other religious expressions, e.g., Hinduism or, even, Islam.) The quest’s question matters, therefore, precisely because *history* matters. If, e.g., Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the Christian *interpretation* of that event (e.g., Rom 4:25)—which is to say, the Christian faith—is not only wrong but (sadly, 1 Cor 15:19) *meaningless*. Caird summarizes this all nicely when he says,


64 Cf. Jeremias’s similar criticism of Bultmann, noted in Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 237.

65 On this, see, e.g., Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 347.
Those who believe that in the life and teaching of Jesus God has given a unique revelation of His character and purpose are committed by this belief, whether they like it or not, whether they admit it or not, to [the] quest. Without 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.  

What this also implies then is that Christianity—now as the interpretation of historical events—cannot be understood without the sort of historical work encouraged by the quest. That is, not only does the Christian faith depend on history ontologically but, we might say, it also depends on it epistemologically. If we’re going to understand the Gospels then we’ve got to understand the historical context in which they were produced. (I hope I’m not assuming too much by assuming we’re all committed, at least in theory, to historical-grammatical exegesis.) History simultaneously reminds us of and closes the gap between the first-century and our own, alerting us to and filling in, e.g., much of what the Gospel writers could simply assume. (Fish don’t often sit back and reflect on water.)

For e.g. and in no particular order—whether in relevance or theme. History helps us understand (1) why Pilate was so worried about his status as Caesar’s friend and thus so ready to convict an innocent man; (2) why Jews didn’t associate with Samaritans (cf. John 4:9); (3) why the Sanhedrin didn’t have the authority to execute Jesus (John 18:31) but had the authority to execute his brother (Jos., Ant. 20.197–203); (4) what it would mean for Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, to be chosen to burn incense in the


67 Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 102.

68 Wright, “No, We Need History,” 28; Darrell Bock, “Abandon Studying the Historical Jesus? No, We Need Context,” Christianity Today, April 2010, 1–2 (web-only); Robert Morgan, “The Historical Jesus and the Theology of the New Testament,” in The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 197, 201, 203. Francis Watson says it this way: “Historical research can help to make the full humanity of Jesus imaginable and plausible, especially by filling out the picture provided by the gospels of his geographical, historical and cultural context. The gospels refer to Galilee and Judaea, Nazareth and Jerusalem, but they do not tell us where these places are; nor are we told what a synagogue or a Pharisee is. The realities of Roman power and the role of high priest and temple are presupposed but not explained. The ‘implied reader’ of the gospels already possesses a broad understanding of Jesus’ context, and to supplement this understanding from elsewhere should in principle lead to new insights into the story the evangelists tell. These insights will not be confined to relatively trivial aspects of this story, but will contribute to an understanding of matters that lie at its heart. When Peter confesses, ‘You are the Christ!’, it is presupposed that this term and the role it designates have already been made available to him through his primary linguistic and cultural formation (cf. John 1.41). ‘Christ’ is not presented as a uniquely Christian coinage; historical research must therefore trace its pre-Christian Jewish antecedents in other surviving texts, so as to clarify the distinctively Christian appropriation of this term” (“The quest for the real Jesus,” in The Cambridge Companion to Jesus [ed. Markus Bockmuehl; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 166–67, emphasis added).

69 See Harold W. Hoehner, “Pontius Pilate,” Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 615–16 (i.e., Pilate’s failed attempt to flatter Tiberius with the whole shield incident in the year just prior to Jesus’ crucifixion).

Temple;71 (5) what it would mean for Jesus to eat with tax collectors and “sinners”; (6) who the chief priests or the Pharisees were;72 (7) what it would mean for Jesus to call his own followers, not least twelve of them;73 (8) what it would mean for Jesus to announce the imminent coming of Yahweh; (9) how much, if at all, Jesus’ interpretation of the OT (e.g., his idea of ‘Christ’ or ‘son of man’) differed from his opponents or his disciples;74 (10) why Jesus was crucified as a messianic pretender.

If you’re skeptical about the value of history or, perhaps, have some idea that it poses a challenge to the sufficiency of Scripture, you may want to recall the last time you had to look something up in BDAG.75 I agree with Wright when he notes that history “is necessary—not to construct a ‘fifth gospel,’ but rather to understand the four we already have. History confounds not only the skeptic who says ‘Jesus never existed’ or ‘Jesus couldn’t have thought or said this or that,’ but also the shallow would-be ‘orthodox’ Christian who, misreading the texts, marginalizes Jesus’ first-century Jewish humanity.”76

B. Why should I care about the Quest’s answers? Put simply, because your neighbor does. But, let me start in your study. If you plan to do any work in the Gospels and use secondary literature written after the 17th century, the author will probably interact with at least one of the quests sketched above. Most will assume you’re generally familiar with the key players and issues. If I were to choose an analogy, I’d say it’s similar to trying to read Paul without ever having read the OT. You’re going to miss things.

Now, let’s talk about your neighbor: if you plan to have a conversation with your neighbor about Jesus, the conversation will undoubtedly be influenced by the quest sketched above. Perhaps you’ve had the experience—I have—of sharing this or that piece of the Christian

71 Cf. L. D. Hurst and J. B. Green, “Priest, Priesthood,” Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 634–35: “Each group [or division of priests] served in the Temple twice each year for one week. During their Temple service, duties were divided among the priests by lot, with the greatest honor falling to the one chosen to enter the Temple and burn incense. Luke narrates that Zechariah was chosen for this exceptional duty, which could be performed by a priest only once in his lifetime.”


74 Richard Bauckham calls this “one of the most important areas” of background research. See his essay “The Relevance of Extra-Canonical Jewish Texts to New Testament Study,” in The Jewish World around the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010), 214.

75 Wayne Grudem’s attempt to distinguish between “lexicographical resources” and “historical background information” seems artificial to me (“The Perspicuity of Scripture,” Them 34/3 [2009]: 297). For e.g., which is at play when trying to understand the titles used of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g., “Christ”; “[the] son of man”; etc.)?

worldview with an unbelieving neighbor only to have her say, “Well, that’s just what the Bible
says; how do you know that’s what Jesus really taught?” The question may not have appeared
quite so often in your parent’s or grandparent’s visitation reports, but it will yours, especially if
your evangelistic work takes place in the shadow of a university or, for that matter, a mosque. In
short, friends, this is the conversation people are having.77 Thus, if (to slightly paraphrase Dunn)
we want “to continue to make any kind of truth claims of relevance beyond the confines of [our]
churches, then [we’ve got] to make them within [this] public forum. The alternative is to settle
back into an internal ecclesiastical discourse which cannot be understood or effectively
communicated outside the ekklesia.”78

Moreover, not only is this the conversation your neighbor is having, but it’s also the one
he’s hiding behind.79 He’s adopted one or another of the quest’s Jesuses and assumes he’s put
the lie to orthodox Christianity. Your neighbor, in other words, is making a historical claim,
whether he recognizes it or not. He’s appealing to history and to history you must go.80 How else
do you plan to confront these alternative pictures of Jesus—these alternative faiths—produced
by the quest and its popularizers. How, e.g., can Dan Brown’s Jesus be put to rest, if not by a
thorough account of who Jesus actually was.81 One simply cannot say to Brown or his disciples,
“You’re wrong and I’m right, though I refuse to argue the relative merits of our historical
claims.” Not only would the assertion to “believe the Gospels”—accept my faith—fail
apologetically but it would unwittingly give the impression that Christianity can stand lose from
history, that its merits can rise or fall irrespective of what really happened. When Paul turns to
talk about the resurrection in one of his letters to the Corinthians, he doesn’t simply say, “I said
it—which today would be like saying “It’s in Scripture”—therefore, believe it.” Rather, what’s
he do if not to start talking about witnesses, 500 of them, many of whom were probably still
living at the time Paul wrote and, thus, able to receive skeptical visitors.82 “You ask me how I
know he lives . . . here’s a list of addresses.”

We must wrestle with the quest’s answers if we want to put ourselves in a position to
urge others—those outside the charmed circle of our churches—to consider what the real Jesus
might mean for them.83 If indeed Jesus did say this or that, as the Gospels record, and if Jesus
was killed for doing this and that, and if indeed the early church claimed that this Jesus was
raised from the dead, then it matters what your neighbor does with this Jesus. His he can take or,
I suppose more likely, leave. In other words, if the Gospels are fundamentally accurate, then,

78 Jesus Remembered, 34.
79 See, e.g., Wright, who notes, “[H]istory cannot compel faith. But it is very good at clearing away the
smoke screens behind which unfaith often hides” (“No, We Need History,” 28; also Bock, “Abandon Studying the
Historical Jesus? No, We Need Context,” 1–2; for proof, see Keener, The Historical Jesus of the Gospels, 28).
80 This is a slightly-modified version of Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 11.
81 See Wright’s similar question, “No, We Need History,” 28.
e.g., the eternally-popular idea that Jesus was a good teacher and example is a closed door, a non-option. If the Gospels are fundamentally accurate, one is not allowed to say Jesus was a good teacher . . . full stop, or Jesus was a good example . . . full stop. The Gospels won’t allow this sort of nonsense; it’s a violent domestication of their message.84 In short, historical work—the kind that shows the world the kind of literature the Gospels really are—forces critics to do away with silly—sentimental—notions about Jesus and meet him full on. The quest, at its best, gives us the resources to do just this sort of thing.85

III. Continuing the Quest: Recommended Resources

Let me conclude with a few recommendations for ways you can join in the quest yourself.

A. On the quest, see esp.


B. On the relationship between faith and history, see esp.


C. On the reliability of the Gospels’ history

1. Which gospels (canon)? see esp.


2. History or something else (genre)? see esp.


3. Why should I trust the Gospels’ history?
   a. For an introductory survey, see


85 I wonder too, as an aside, how many of us would admit that this or that piece of historical evidence has comforted us during a period of doubt. Surely I’m not the only one; see Richard Hays’ comment on Wright’s work, “Knowing Jesus: Story, History and the Question of Truth,” in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2011), 54–55.

86 A good entrée into Wright’s book is the essay, cited above, entitled “Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church,” which was given at the Wheaton Theology Conference (2009) and is available in audio and video formats.


D. On the historical context assumed by the Gospels

1. Primary Sources 88
   a. The Apocrypha
      New Revised Standard Version
      *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (For the full-text, see NETS.)
   b. Pseudepigrapha
      Charles, R. H. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1913. (The full text is available here.)
      For the texts in their original languages, see the Online Critical Pseudepigrapha.
   c. Josephus 89
      Perseus Digital Library
      Early Jewish Writings
   d. Dead Sea Scrolls 90
   e. Philo
      Early Jewish Writings

2. Secondary Sources

87 For an abbreviated version of Bauckham’s argument, see his *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grove Biblical Series; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008). Bauckham also summarizes his book in this 10-minute video.

88 See the slightly expanded list of primary resources here. This list notes the standard critical eds., along with pointing out several web-based tools (e.g., a searchable bib. on Dead Sea Scroll studies). For an excellent introduction to these primary sources, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).


90 For research on the Scrolls, see here. For some of the texts in their original language, see here. For a handful of translated texts, see here.