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THE CONTEMPORARY QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS¹

Dale C. Allison, Jr.

At the moment many voices are trying to tell who Jesus of Nazareth really was. For the first time in my memory even small local bookstores in the States feature several scholarly books on the historical Jesus. They are selling well. John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*² and Burton Mack's *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q*³ have together now sold somewhere in the neighbourhood of 125,000 copies. Those who have written academic books will know this is a very large number.

So many books claiming to unveil the real Jesus have appeared of late that some say we are seeing the third quest for the historical Jesus. The first quest was the nineteenth century German endeavour so memorably reported by Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.⁴ The second was the so-called new quest, inaugurated by Ernst Käsemann's famous 1953 lecture in Marburg and then carried on by some of Rudolf Bultmann's students.⁵ The third-- well, that is the subject of this lecture. I should like to offer some scattered observations about what is going on right now.

To begin with one should be unhappy with the typology which is quickly becoming the common wisdom: first quest, new quest, third quest.⁶ This triad raises at least two questions. First,

¹ This is an abbreviated version of the Alexander Robertson lecture, delivered in March of 1996 at the University of Glasgow. I have preserved the informality of the original address. It is reproduced here in honour of Professor Russell on his eightieth birthday.

² San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

³ San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993

⁴ New York: Macmillan, 1961, trans. of *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906.

⁵ See 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus,' in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SBT 41 (London: SCM, 1964) pp. 15-47.

⁶ The typology appears to have been first used by N. T. Wright: see Stephen Neil and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 397-98.

what about the many who laboured between Schweitzer and Käsemann, that is, in the fifty year period between the so-called old quest and the so-called new quest? Secondly, what about those who wrote after Käsemann and before the so-called third quest but were not Bultmannians, not really new questers?⁷

Concern here is not unfounded. I recently read a book which, although it is all about the current quest for Jesus, opens by offering

See also 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. Cf. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. ix ('A third quest is under way'); C.E. Braaten, 'Jesus and the Church: An Essay on Ecclesial Hermeneutics,' *Ex Audiu* 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; David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1995), pp.17, 21 ('We do believe that the extreme skepticism of some scholars .. has rightly been rejected by many recent scholars, including several of those in the so-called "third quest"').

⁷ Wright, 'Jesus, Quest for the Historical,' strangely locates his discussion of Joachim Jeremias, Edward Schillebeekx, the Jesus Seminar, Burton Mack and F. Gerald Downing under the heading of the new quest. This reveals the artificiality of the scheme. 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 the old quest than as taking up the new quest. And the relevant works of the Jesus Seminar, Mack, and Downing all appeared after the publication of the books that Wright assigns to the third quest (E.g. Ben F. Meyers, *the Aims of Jesus* (1979) and John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (1980). Obviously Wright's taxonomy is not chronological. It would indeed seem to follow, since the Jesus Seminar, Mack and Downing are still turning out works on Jesus, that the new quest is continuing at the same time as the third quest. Does this make sense? It is interesting that Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 4 can declare that 'The Jesus Seminar thinks of itself as the vanguard of the "Third Quest"'

a history of what has gone on over the last two hundred years. The author reviews the first quest, the new quest, the third quest. What about the period between the first quest and the new quest? He calls this--as have some others recently--the period of no quest. He says that, between 1906 and 1953, a new-found awareness that Christians typically look down the well of history only to see their own reflected faces, combined with scepticism about Mark's historicity, the acids of form criticism, and a new theology which 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 fuelled the 'Old Quest,' was lost."⁸ The author then moves on to the New Quest.

What does one say to this? The words are a fair generalisation about Bultmann and some of his students. But Bultmann did not rule the theological world, only parts of it. This was when C. H. Dodd and Vincent Taylor and T. W. Manson--all British questers--were living forces to be reckoned with, and when Joachim Jeremias was turning out study after study on the Jesus of history. Certainly scholars in the first half of our century did not share their predecessors' confidence in our ability to write full-bodied biographies of Jesus; and, just like the behaviourists of that time, who refrained from speaking of the consciousness of their subjects, many grew uneasy with talk about Jesus' so-called "messianic consciousness." There was further in many quarters--particularly German quarters--doubt as to the theological relevance of the historical Jesus. But many continued to quest nonetheless. Eight feet from my desk there is a little bookshelf whose occupants tell me that this was the time of Joseph Klausner's *Jesus: His Life, Times and Teaching* (1922), of A. C. Headlam's *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (1923), of Shirley Jackson Case's *Jesus: A New Biography* (1927), of T. W. Manson's *The Teaching of Jesus* (1931) and *The Sayings of Jesus* (1937/1949), of Rudolf Otto's *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man* (1934), of Martin Dibelius' *Jesus* (1939), of C. J. Cadoux's *The Historic Mission of Jesus*

⁸ Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995).

(1941), of William Manson's *Jesus the Messiah* (1943), and of R. H. Fuller's *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus* (1953).

Now these were not insignificant contributions. Everybody in my field read these books, whose authors were not second stringers on the sidelines of NT studies. No quest? Maybe reduced quest, but certainly not no quest. The time between Schweitzer and Käsemann was also when so many divinity students throughout Britain and North America were learning about Jesus from the first edition of A. M. Hunter's *The Work and Words of Jesus* (1950), a popular digest of the allegedly non-existent quest.

If the typology I am criticising falsely characterises the first half of the twentieth century and may mislead people into believing that during that period scholars did not produce instructive books on Jesus, it also distorts the facts for the period between 1950 and 1980, the latter being the date one chronicler gives for the approximate beginning of the so-called third quest.⁹ 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. Concurrent with and subsequent to the opening of the much ballyhooed but disappointing new quest, and preceding the so-called third quest, publishers gave us the following--again I just have to look at one of my own bookcases: Vincent Taylor's *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (1954), Ethelbert Stauffer's *Jesus and His Story* (German edition, 1957), Morton Scott Enslin's *The Prophet from Nazareth* (1961), Otto Betz's *What Do We Know About Jesus?* (German edition, 1965), C. K. Barrett's *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (1967), Xavier Leon-Dufour's *The Gospels and the Jesus of History* (French edition, 1967), Norman Perrin's *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (1967), Eduard Schweizer's *Jesus* (German edition, 1968), C. H. Dodd's *The Founder of Christianity* (1970), Etienne Trocmé's *Jesus as seen by his Contemporaries* (French

⁹ 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.'

edition, 1971), and Geza Vermes' *Jesus the Jew* (1973). The 1950's, 60's, and 70's also saw the publication of important New Testament Christologies which had much to say about Jesus--those of Oscar Cullmann (1957), Ferdinand Hahn (1963), and R. H. Fuller (1965) come to mind--as well as three significant German theologies of the New Testament which open with substantial accounts of the historical Jesus--those of Werner Kümmel (1969) and Leonard Goppelt (1975) and the unfinished work of Jeremias (1971). Gustav Aulén, writing in 1973, observed that "literature on Jesus is now experiencing prosperity."¹⁰ That was over twenty years ago, and almost a decade before some now tell us the third quest started.

Aulén was correct, and I have been scratching my head trying to figure out what is truly different about the last two or three decades. What is this so-called third quest? The attention to extra-canonical sources--so important for some current questers -- is no good reason for positing something new. For many contemporary questers--for example, E. P. Sanders and John Meier--stick to the canonical sources; and in any case the purported discovery of authentic sayings of Jesus in extra-biblical materials was long ago the subject of Jeremias' *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (1951), and before that of Alfred Resch's massive 1906 tome, *Agrapha*. The struggle against apocalyptic eschatology, against the belief that Jesus thought the eschatological consummation to be at hand, a struggle which characterises the work of Crossan and Marcus Borg and Mack, is also nothing new. They have just taken the baton from earlier scholars such as C. H. Dodd and T. Francis Glasson and John A. T. Robinson. Nor can one find anything too 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. But 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 see more continuity with Judaism whereas they saw less. And yet we continue to walk in the direction they were headed.

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Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) -- trans of the 2nd Swedish edition, 1974.

Birger Pearson has offered that the alleged third quest is “distinguishable from the first two quests in claiming to lack *any* theological agenda.”¹¹ One can concur that E. P. Sanders does not wear a theological agenda on his sleeve, but then he is in this respect hardly typical. Are we to say that Ben F. Meyer, A. E. Harvey, John Meier, N. T. Wright, and anyone else who does write with significant theological interest cannot be third questers? Moreover, one wonders how to classify participants who appear to have an anti-theological agenda. I shall return to the Jesus Seminar below, but here it may be noted that, in Pearson’s words, this group is “driven by an ideology of secularisation, and a process of colouring the historical evidence to fit a secular ideal.”¹² Theology is hardly the only ideological agenda one can bring to the task of interpreting Jesus. It may in fact be that none of us is altogether free of theological or anti-theological interests, so the presence or lack thereof seems a questionable criterion for classifying scholars who quest for Jesus.

Sometimes history naturally suggests we divide it in a particular way. Judaism was truly different after 70 C.E. than before, just as the American South was truly different after the Civil War than before. But sometimes the lines we write upon history for our own practical ends are misleading. One can, for instance, say that Gnosticism did not exist before Christianity because it was a Christian heresy; but this is an explanation which leaves too much unexplained.

Maybe the term, “third quest,” is a phantasm conjured by a desire to bring order out of the chaos of our discipline. What if there is no convenient order to be discerned? What if our divisions between quests are lines drawn in the water? Blake says somewhere: “Education teaches straight lines but life is fuzzy.” That there is indeed a contemporary quest for Jesus is manifest. That there is really much new about it is not. 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. And trying to

¹¹ ‘The Gospel according to the Jesus Seminar,’ *Religion* 25 (1995), p. 320.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 334.

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.

One is not even sure the so-called third quest's volume of production means much. Books on Paul have also multiplied of late. So too have books on Hebrews. And books on James. There are just more NT scholars writing now than in the past; and there are more publishers and journals now than in the past; and so there are naturally more books and articles on Jesus now than in the past.¹³

One wonders: maybe the major difference between what is going on now and what went on earlier is that today--for whatever reason--books about Jesus get more popular publicity. Maybe the quest has changed less than its marketing.

II.

But with that let me pass on to a second topic, namely, human ignorance. One of the more troubling features of the current quest is that too few of us--I exclude E. P. Sanders and John P. Meier from the following generalisation¹⁴--too few of us want to say, we do not know. But sometimes--often times--we really do not know.

Consider Appendix I to John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus*--a book whose dust jacket declares it to be "the first comprehensive determination of who Jesus was, what he did, what he said." While Crossan is not responsible for this outrageous blurb, we can hold him accountable for the appendix, which is entitled "An Inventory of the Jesus Tradition by Chronological Stratification and Independent Attestation." In this inventory Crossan breaks down the early traditions about Jesus into 522 units. These units in turn are classified as belonging to one of four strata. To the first stratum belong materials attested in sources dating from 30- 60 C.E.; to the second materials attested in sources dating from 60-80 C.E.; to the

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ One of the great virtues of the books on Jesus by these two scholars is that they often declare inability to determine the origin of a saying or tradition.

third materials attested in sources dating from 80-120 C.E.; and to the fourth materials attested in sources dating from 120-150 C.E. Within each strata sayings are then classified into four additional categories depending upon whether they are independently attested in four or more sources, three sources, or two sources, or appear in only one source.

One problem with Crossan's inventory is that it might foster the illusion of scientific objectivity. The four periods--30-60 C.E., 60-80 C.E., 80-120 C.E., 120-150 C.E.--are in truth arbitrary. More importantly, the inventory presupposes all sorts of controversial judgements. The first stratum, for instance, includes what Crossan calls *Gospel of Thomas I*, his second stratum *Gospel of Thomas II*. Crossan believes that the extra-canonical *Gospel of Thomas*, discovered in Egypt in the 1940's, to be not only a first-century document independent of the canonical Gospels but the product of two distinct redactions which he can distinguish. Perhaps he is right. But those of us who would not wager much on the truth of his hypothesis--and that is what it is, a hypothesis-- will find his cataloguing system less than helpful.

But let me move on to the chief complaint. Each unit comes prefaced with a plus sign (+) or a negative sign (-). A plus sign means the unit or its core is from the historical Jesus. A negative sign means that the unit does not derive from Jesus himself but later Christian tradition. Is it not amazing that there are only plus signs and negative signs? Where are all the question marks? Sober reflection suggests there are limits to the powers of our historical-critical methods. Some things cannot be known. Surely Jesus said some of the things attributed to him. And surely Jesus did not say some of the things attributed to him. And just as surely there must be occasions on which we cannot tell the difference. Doubt must surround our historical conjectures as shadow does light. It is strange that Crossan, who is a sceptic about so much--including Jesus' apocalyptic orientation--is not more sceptical about his own ability to divine the past. Some of his incredulity should be self-directed. I would trust Crossan more if he would more often confess to be within the cloud of unknowing.

Crossan might respond that I have misinterpreted his negative sign. Maybe, he would say, it indicates only that a unit

cannot be safely attributed to Jesus, that it might come from Jesus but we just cannot know this. Crossan, however, does not say this. He says that a negative sign stands for his judgement that a unit does not come from the historical Jesus. Beyond this, many--not a few but many--of the units which carry the negative sign contradict, as Crossan himself freely confesses, his own reconstruction of the historical Jesus. So for him those units just cannot be authentic.

The subject of ignorance brings us to that other current book that has sold so well, Burton Mack's *The Lost Gospel*. This is a book all about Q, the hypothetical collection of sayings of Jesus used by both Matthew and Luke. In Mack's book this hypothetical document becomes a wrecking ball that again and again batters conventional reconstructions of Christian origins. Mack contends that Q has very little indeed to do with memories of the historical Jesus. It is rather a sourcebook for detectives interested in discovering, without benefit of Paul or Acts, the true history of earliest Christianity. Research into Q reveals that Q developed in stages, and that at the earliest stage Jesus was remembered as a enigmatic aphorist; only in later stages did he come to be dressed in the clothes of a Jewish prophet who spoke of things eschatological. The Jesus who stays hidden in the mists of Mack's history was a Jewish Cynic, a countercultural figure about whom we can know hardly anything. For apart from the early, non- eschatological phase of Q, its later phases evidently tell us nothing about this sage: they are for us only opportunities to offer hypothetical reconstructions of early Christian communities.

Mack's analysis of Q moreover reveals that the first followers of Jesus did not confess him to be the Jewish Messiah, did not believe that he rose from the dead, did not think the last days were to hand. Not that the alleged first Q explicitly rejects these things: it just does not mention them. Like Sherlock Holmes, who noticed that the dog did not bark in the night-time, Mack finds great meaning in silence.

Mack, however, is no Sherlock Holmes. Nor is his work likely to be the revolutionary contribution which the jacket blurbs make it out to be but--I shall be candid instead of generous--rather just one more example of how one can drift anywhere with an

unanchored imagination.¹⁵ Mack--like Crossan--is a victim of the all-too-human desire to know what cannot be known. I certainly share Mack's belief in Q; moreover, in a forthcoming publication I have myself sought to unravel its compositional history. Nonetheless, we really cannot go behind a hypothetical document and reconstruct the hypothetical history and theological development of the hypothetical communities which produced it and then make all this the key to Christian origins. This is much too much.

Mack's book poses as a massive deduction from the evidence. But its true method is the unstated assumption that the mere possibility of imagining a series of historical sequences is reason enough for believing that such a series in fact occurred. The improbability of the various propositions can be detected not by contrary evidence--they are not subject to falsification--but by a lack of evidence. And the feebleness of the hypothetical constructs is only hidden by their multiplicity. I am reminded of that infamous example of mixed metaphor: we have here shaky knees with feet of clay on thin ice.¹⁶ Now Mack may serve a purpose, for he causes us to re-examine so much we take for granted. But his habit of turning things on their head in order to make them stand on their feet probably tells us more about his personality than about ancient Christianity. Given that his arguments are all, in the end, about silence, the book is much too loud. Sometimes we should not forsake the tedium of the familiar.

Both Crossan and Mack want to know too much. The same is true of the so-called Jesus Seminar, that scholarly collectivity--made up mostly of North American academics--which from time to time gets together to vote on the authenticity of the Jesus tradition. They recently published the results of their voting on the sayings of Jesus. In my country all the bookstores right now carry *The Five Gospels*--a four-colour edition of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas*. If a saying is in red then Jesus said it. If it is in pink then it sort of sounds like him. If it is in grey then he probably said no such thing. If it is in black then he certainly

¹⁵ cf. Pearson, 'Jesus Seminar,' p. 337: Mack offers an example of 'imagination run amok.'

¹⁶ Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 53 speaks of 'pure flimflam.'

said no such thing. The future will see their book on the stories about Jesus.

There are several serious problems with the Jesus Seminar, whose method gives the illusion that some sort of consensus has been produced. In the first place a real consensus might be a dangerous thing, for it could encourage uncritical acceptance of positions that should always be re-examined: not everything that is, is right. Beyond that, what exactly can consensus--a statistical concept--mean in this context? Whose opinions should be registered? And how exactly should we register them? Should all New Testament scholars--maybe professors with Ph.D.'s?--be given votes? or only those who have written books and articles on the Gospels? or only those whose books and articles have had to do with the historical Jesus? And would those books and articles--in what languages?--need to have been published in the last twenty years or the last five years? And should it be one person, one vote; or should we have power rankings, as in tennis, so that the votes of acknowledged experts carry more weight than the votes of recent graduate students? (A healthy number of Jesus Seminar members are on any account novices.) Should a so-called consensus be obtained by granting to some seminar or study group the status of an electoral college? But who then elects the electoral college, and how? Surely they should not be self-elected, as the Jesus Seminar members are, should they? And how much time should pass between voting sessions, so that our historical Jesus does not go out of date? Perhaps some words of Oscar Cullmann that come to my mind are here relevant:

Despite the advantages of any working partnership, I do not regard collective thinking, as it is expressed in fashions and their corresponding slogans, as a good thing in our theological enterprise. In this case the general discussion gets bogged down within narrowly confined circles of thinking instead of leading to a deeper level, often becoming a monotonous, collective monologue without any real encounter, and leaving no room for raising new and individual questions.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967) p. 13.

But let us come to the real problem. The Jesus Seminar colours red only one sentence in the entirety of Mark, that is, regards as from Jesus only a single line—one which, incredibly enough, sounds like Paul in Romans 13 and so fails to satisfy the Seminar's criterion of dissimilarity: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." This sceptical result, this disintegration of the synoptic Jesus, condemns the whole enterprise. If our earliest Gospel is really so thoroughly a post-Easter document then, quite simply, the Gospels have given up the ghost of the historical Jesus and the quest is over. It is time to confess our ignorance and move on to other pursuits. If our sources are no better than the Jesus Seminar imagines, then let us admit that a history lost cannot be found. Let us have the courage to say plainly that our sources have failed us and the good judgement to refrain from offering in their place our own tales. Once we have eviscerated our sources we should have the decency to let the remains rest in peace--by which I mean we ought to have the sense to quit questing. The Jesus Seminar, however, instead of doing what for them would be the wise thing, namely, admitting defeat and going home, has instead told their own tale: they have discovered that Jesus was a non-eschatological sage and humanitarian rather unlike the eschatological prophet of the synoptics who recurrently warns of eschatological judgement. Thus they urge that Jesus never said, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out," for, in the words of their book, *The Five Gospels*, "the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar do not think such wholesale condemnations . . . typical of Jesus."

III.

After reviewing the nineteenth century's quest Albert Schweitzer contended that the honest scholar must travel one of two roads: thoroughgoing scepticism or thoroughgoing eschatology. The historical Jesus of future criticism, he wrote, "will be a Jesus, who was Messiah, and lived as such, either on the ground of a literary fiction of the earliest Evangelist, or on the ground of a purely

eschatological Messianic conception."¹⁸ By this Schweitzer meant that if Jesus did not live with the conviction that God was about to fulfil His promises to Israel, then the synoptics are so unreliable that about Jesus we know next to nothing. Either, as the synoptics indicate, Jesus' teaching was suffused with eschatology, or our sources are so misleading that we just cannot say much about Jesus.

Now there is much in Schweitzer with which to disagree, and sometimes antitheses are artificial. But this antithesis is not. We face Schweitzer's decision. If the SYNOPTICS give us some idea of what Jesus was all about then he was all about eschatology--about tribulation and vindication, about punishment and reward, about judgement and resurrection. The synoptics are full of eschatological materials. There are the sayings about the coming Son of man. There are the sayings about the coming kingdom of God. There is Mark 13, a lengthy prophecy of the latter days. There is Luke 17, Q's depiction of eschatological catastrophe. There are the prophetic woes cast upon those who reject Jesus' mission. There are the promises of eschatological comfort for the poor and the hungry. Again, if the synoptics have anything much to tell us much about Jesus, then he must have been all about eschatology.

If, however, Jesus was not all about eschatology then the synoptics are so unreliable that the game is up and--well, then, Jesus could have been about almost anything. Once we induce that the synoptics are in such a fundamental thing as eschatology a repository of post-Easter materials significantly incongruent with what Jesus had to say, then we are free to tell a hundred different stories.

Let me put it this way. If the synoptics may be likened to a tree, questers certainly must do a lot of trimming. Once they chop down the tree, however--and the Jesus Seminar has chopped it down-- they cannot put it back up. They can only plant a new tree. Thus S. G. F. Brandon gave us Jesus the anti-Roman zealot. Morton Smith gave us Jesus the magician. Burton Mack has now given us Jesus the Jewish Cynic. Obviously we can, once the old is cleared away, plant almost anything.

Let me try another analogy. My children play with jigsaw puzzles. Sometimes they begin by putting together a picture by

¹⁸

Quest. p. 398.

collecting all the pieces with straight edges and then making the frame. Other times they will start with all the pieces of the same colour, put them together to make a portion of the whole, and then work outward. Once the picture is done one cannot tell which method they used. A completed jigsaw puzzle leaves no clues as to the order in which its pieces were assembled. Although we are reluctant to admit it, maybe the Jesus tradition is similar. We have the finished Gospels; but can we really draw up in any reliable detail, as Crossan has attempted to do, the multitudinous tradition histories that presumably lie behind them?

Writing a commentary on Matthew has given me the opportunity to review the sundry tradition histories that have been offered by divers scholars for all the material in the First Gospel; and I have often offered my own little speculative histories. But as my experience has grown my ambition has narrowed. The overwhelming impression one has after studying the vast secondary literature is that all too often we have been trying to know the unknowable. There is here so much disagreement that honesty counsels maybe we are frequently not doing history but rather just giving our imaginations a healthy work out. Maybe Mt 5:17, a saying which pledges faithfulness to Moses--"I came not to abolish the law and the prophets"--came first and the more radical statements about the law came later. Or maybe it was the other way round. Or maybe to a first-century Mediterranean Jewish peasant there was no contradiction. Who *really* knows? Maybe--as many think--Jesus made himself out to be Daniel's eschatological Son of man; or maybe--as many think--the church did this for him. One can tell either story. And both have been told. One can put together the many pieces of the synoptic puzzle in just about any order. And our sources, being inanimate, cannot protest.

Our ability to envisage so many different primal layers for the Jesus tradition, that is, so many different portraits of the historical Jesus, is worrisome in part because the temptation to make Jesus in our own image, after our likeness, is ever present. Schweitzer's great lesson, that we all find in the synoptic kaleidoscope the pattern we like best, is so difficult to learn, or rather to put into practice. Is it just happy coincidence that the Jesus Seminars have excised from the authentic Jesus tradition just

about everything--including all dogmatism, all eschatology, and all Christology--that might remind them of American fundamentalist Christianity? Surely this result is too good to be true.

Helmut Koester, referring not to orthodox Christians but to moderns who still wish to have Jesus on their side, recently observed: "We are again on the way toward a human Jesus who is just like one of us, one who holds values that are very close to our ideological commitments, a Jesus who is a social reformer and who attacks patriarchal orders, a Jesus who, as a real human person, can stand as an example and inspiration for worthy causes."¹⁹

To aid us in making the currently fashionable non-eschatological social reformer and enigmatic sage, the post-Easter period remains a convenient trash can in which to throw everything that seems of no good use. Crossan and Mack, who give us such a Jesus, protect him by assigning very large loads of uncongenial eschatological elements to the evangelists and their predecessors. They assume, what Robert Funk, writing on behalf of the Jesus Seminar, has confidently affirmed, namely, that "Jesus' followers did not grasp the subtleties of his position and reverted, once Jesus was not there to remind them, to the [apocalyptic] view that they had learned from John the Baptist."²⁰

But there is nothing new under the sun. The avant guard of modern scholarship is, in its own way, just rerunning an old apologetical movie: we have seen this one before. C. H. Dodd, in trying to save Jesus from Schweitzer's brand of eschatology, wrote that Jesus' reporters, "understandably anxious to find his words relevant to their own urgent preoccupations, have given them a twist away from their original intention."²¹ This strategy was also that of Ethelbert Stauffer, who claimed the disciples did not understand Jesus' message because they "were wholly children of their time,

¹⁹ 'Jesus the Victim,' *JBL* III (1992) p. 7.

²⁰ This quotation is from the introduction to R. W. Funk et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. (New York: Macmillan. 1993)

²¹ *The Founder of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan. 1970), p. 123.

furiously tossed upon the waves of Jewish political and apocalyptic messianism."²²

This sort of apology against eschatological error has a long pedigree. It indeed already appears in the New Testament itself. Luke tells us that as Jesus went up to Jerusalem he told his disciples a parable, "because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately" (19:11). Luke, like Dodd and Stauffer, is telling us that while the disciples got it wrong, Jesus got it right: he made no mistake; he was just misunderstood.

Now of course great figures who stand above their times can be misunderstood. I recently finished a book which tried to make the intriguing case that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was quite misunderstood by absolutely everyone, including Wittgenstein's close friends and associates²³. However that may be, with regard to Jesus we are dealing with fragmentary sources from 2,000 years ago. Is it not rather far-fetched to think we can stick our hands beneath truly misleading documents and pull up the truth? I remember what Nils Dahl wrote: "In no case can any distinct and sharp separation be achieved between genuine words of Jesus and the constructions of the community. We do not escape the fact that we know Jesus only as the disciples remembered him. Whoever thinks that the disciples completely misunderstood their Master or even consciously falsified his picture may give phantasy free reign."²⁴ In other words, once we erase the slate, we are free to write our own sentences.

Sometimes maybe we are like the London police who pried open Annie Chapman's dead eyes in the vain hope that her retinas might have retained an image of the last thing Annie saw, namely, Jack the Ripper. Loathing the possibility of leaving our case unsolved, we look for the clues to Jesus' identity in very strange places. The passion to find our man overcomes good sense, so that we search for Jesus in, for instance, a hypothetical first Q, or a

²² *Jesus and His Story* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 156-57.

²³ R. Nieli, *Wittgenstein: From Mysticism to Ordinary Language* (Albany: SUNY, 1987).

²⁴ *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) p. 67.

hypothetical first *Gospel of Thomas*. But Scotland Yard never caught Jack. And the historical Jesus cannot be caught either—at least if we are left only to our own historical-critical devices. We also need the co-operation of our sources. The synoptics--I exclude John--need to be helpful sources or we are out of luck. If the sayings in the synoptics, taken in their entirety, are not roughly congruent with the sorts of things Jesus tended to say, and if the stories of his deeds do not give us a fair sense of the sorts of things people customarily perceived him to do, then what chance have we of saying much interesting about Jesus? Does it really make sense that those who find our sources so vague of memory still manage to produce yet more books about Jesus? One cannot solve a case without some decent witnesses.

This is not apologetics but rather the historian's recognition that if the sources have let us down too much then we have been let down utterly; and we cannot, try as we might, make up the lack. Our attempts in such a case will produce not history but historical fiction.

IV.

One guesses that we look for assistance from the *Gospel of Thomas* and seek to tell the story of the groups behind Q not only because we dislike ignorance but also because our minds are restless for new thoughts, for new discoveries. But if that is so, we can invigorate our discipline, that is, fight our boredom, in more profitable ways. Our time has seen the discovery of an incredibly valuable hoard of ancient documents which indirectly illumine the Gospels and so the historical Jesus. I refer of course to the Dead Sea Scrolls. For many years much of the material remained shut up under a bushel; but it has now seen the light of day, and blessed are our eyes, for many scholars have longed to see what we see, and did not see it. How strange and ironic that precisely at this point in time some are happily heralding the death of traditional historical-critical methods. Nothing else will enable us to sort through the chaos of these amazing documents. And such sorting will, by instructing us much about ancient Judaism, also instruct us about Christian origins and Jesus.

Let me illustrate by calling your attention to just one text, the recently released, fragmentary 4Q521, also known as 4QMessianic Apocalypse. It reads as follows:

[for the heav]ens and the earth will obey his Messiah, [and all] that is in them will not turn away from the holy precepts. . . . The Lord will observe the devout, and call the just by name, and his Spirit will hover over the poor, and the faithful he will renew with his strength. For he will honour the devout upon the throne of eternal royalty, freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted. . . . And the Lord will perform marvellous acts such as have not existed, just as he sa[id] for he will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the meek, give lavishly to the needy, lead the exiled and enrich the hungry

Let me suggest the relevance of these lines for the study of Jesus and the Gospels by asking a series of questions. Because heaven as well as earth obeys the Messiah is he a transcendent figure who perhaps has authority even over the angels? That is, do we have here a Jewish Messiah whose status approaches the exalted status of Jesus in the Gospels? Does 4Q521 not remind us of Mt 28.18, where Jesus declares, "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me"? Is it more than coincidence that our text not only draws words and phrases from Isaiah 61:1 but also speaks of the eschatological enrichment of the hungry and that the four beatitudes in Q's sermon on the plain do exactly the same thing? When one adds that the allusions to Isaiah 61 in 4Q521 are also accompanied by references to miraculous healings and the resurrection of the dead, just as Jesus' answer to John the Baptist in Mt 11:5--another Q text--similarly joins allusions to Isaiah 61 with references to miraculous healings and the resurrection of the dead, do we have enough to postulate that Jesus or a contributor to Q actually knew 4Q521? Or should we infer that the Q text reflects a traditional exegesis of Isaiah 61? If in 4Q521 the miracles which the Lord performs, including healing the blind and preaching to the poor, are done through his anointed one--

John Collins has argued for this²⁵--do we have here evidence that some pre-Christian Jews expected a wonder-working Messiah or eschatological prophet, so that we can better understand why Jesus the wonder-worker excited messianic expectation, and better understand why the Gospels associate the title, "Son of David," with Jesus' healing of blind people? Again, if in 4Q521 the miracles which the Lord performs are done through an anointed one, might not this help us understand why the synoptic Jesus, who asks people not to reveal his identity as Messiah, also asks them not to speak about his miracles? Finally, in the light of 4Q521, if one were to judge that the little catalogue of deeds in Mt 11:5 goes back to Jesus--something even Bultmann thought--what would this say about Jesus' self-conception? Would it imply that he thought of himself as the central figure in his own eschatological scenario? Obviously the Scrolls give us more than enough to think about.

V.

But I have gone on long enough. It is time to conclude. Of the making of many books about Jesus there is no end. Speaking for myself, I do not find study of them a weariness of the flesh. It is, however, disconcerting that there are almost as many candidates for the historical Jesus as there are Christs of faith. To confuse the issue further we have three synoptics with their three different pictures of Jesus: they too disagree about things. So here, as so often in modern life, we are in a cafeteria of choices. We must decide. How then shall we decide wisely? There is no simple answer, and we should not pretend otherwise. It is hard to find the past, and much of it cannot be found. One can, however, recalling Schweitzer's famous but now insufficiently heeded dichotomy, say this much: the Jesus of Matthew and the Jesus of Mark and the Jesus of Luke do closely resemble one another. Indeed, they share a distinct set of family resemblances--including a very strong eschatological orientation. This orientation runs throughout the tradition, so that those who distrust that tradition as much as the Jesus Seminarians do should not tell us that Jesus was not an eschatological prophet; rather should they allow that the

²⁵ 'The Works of the Messiah.' *Dead Sea Discoveries* 1 (1993), pp. 1-15.

tradition is so corrupt that nothing much can be said: they should become in this matter agnostics. But those of us who can believe that the synoptics are at least as much a help as a hindrance in our quest, must judge that the historical Jesus was, despite the current trend to deny this, all about eschatology.

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