

**THREE SEARCHES FOR THE “HISTORICAL JESUS”
BUT NO BIBLICAL CHRIST:
THE RISE OF THE SEARCHES (PART 1)**

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This is a two-part series. Part One covers the rise of three periods of activity known as “searching for the ‘historical Jesus.’” Its overarching purpose is a deliberate attempt to destroy the influence of the gospels and the church upon society. While this purpose is openly and honestly admitted by theological liberals, evangelicals who participate now in the “third” quest are far less candid as to its design. Part Two will cover this growing evangelical participation in searching. These searches started with the rise in dominance of the ideology of historical criticism over two hundred years ago and are a natural consequence of the innate historical skepticism replete in them. The first two searches ended as declared failures by those who engaged in them. Now some of the same scholars who have inspired the New Perspective on Paul have also been largely influential in stimulating the “third search for ‘the historical Jesus’” (e.g. Sanders, Wright, Dunn). When the evidence is examined, only one overall “search for the ‘historical’ Jesus” actually has existed. All three are unified by sharing, to some degree, the unifying characteristics of significant degrees of suspicion regarding the gospels, similar ideological approaches in utilizing historical criticism, a refusal to accept the biblical accounts as truly depicting Jesus as He actually was in history, and a marked preference for developing a view of Jesus that is acceptable to scholarship.

Introduction: Searching for the “Historical Jesus”

For the past several hundred years, scholars have conducted what is known as “the search for the historical Jesus” or as it is also called today, “historical Jesus research.” Such a search operates under the *a priori* assumption that the four canonical gospels, the only documents written concerning the life of Jesus, are in some

significant ways deficient, incorrect, or inadequate in their presentation of how Jesus actually was in history. This search posits a sharp cleavage between the gospel portraits of Jesus and His actual existence in first-century Palestine and seeks to establish a scholarly consensus view of Jesus that would be considered a more accurate representation of His life than what is contained in the gospels.

The “Historical Jesus” Research Is Searching for a Definition of the Term

The term, “historical Jesus,” cannot truly be defined with any degree of satisfaction or consensus among those who advocate such research. The irony of this state of affairs in its definition has resulted from the fact that no consensus has occurred as to what the “historical Jesus” is or was. Hagner incisively comments,

It deserves to be emphasized that in both the nineteenth-century writing on Jesus and that of today, what seems to be wanting is not so much a *truer* view of Jesus as an *alternative* view. The traditional view of Jesus, the view held by the early church, is old-fashioned, uninteresting, and thought to be unconvincing. What the world craves is a debunking of the traditional Jesus, a Jesus rescued from the dogma of the church for twenty-first century human beings. What will sell books and bring fame or notoriety and new explanations of Jesus—explanations acceptable to the proclivities and sensitivities of the modern world.¹

After two hundred-plus years of questing for whatever the “historical Jesus” might be, involving possibly three perceived “quests” (whether three exist is debated, as will be discussed), no general agreement exists among biblical scholars who pursue this discipline as to what the term means. Renown British theologian, N. T. Wright, himself a strategic impetus for a “third” quest of the “historical Jesus,” now known officially as the “Life of Jesus Research” laments, “The current wave of books about Jesus offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement about method; certainly no common set of results.”² An acute subjectivity reigns in every presentation of whatever the “historical Jesus” is/was.

Whatever the “Historical Jesus” Is, It Must NOT Be the Christ of the Gospels

In 1959, James M. Robinson, a leader of what is now known as the “second quest” period, did, however, stress what the term could *not* mean:

The term “historical Jesus” is not simply identical with “Jesus” or “Jesus of Nazareth,” as if the adjective “historical” were a meaningless addition. Rather the adjective is used in a technical sense, and makes a specific con-

¹ Donald A. Hagner, “An Analysis of Recent ‘Historical Jesus’ Studies,” in *Religious Diversity in the Graeco-Roman World*, eds. Dan Cohn-Sherbok and John M. Court (Sheffield: T & T Clark, 2001), 82.

² N. T. Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” *ABD*, III, 800.

tribution to the total meaning of the expression. “Historical” is used in the sense of “things in the past which have been established by objective scholarship.” Consequently the expression “historical Jesus” comes to mean: “What can be known of Jesus of Nazareth by means of scientific methods of the historian.” Thus we have to do with a technical expression which must be recognized as such, and not automatically identified with the simple term “Jesus.”³

Robinson continues regarding the first alleged quest that “[t]his was in fact the assumption of the nineteenth century quest of the historical Jesus. For this quest was initiated by the enlightenment in its effort to escape the limitations of dogma unrestricted by the doctrinal presentations of him in the Bible, creed and Church.”⁴ Since no perceived agreement or consensus exists as to who or what the “historical Jesus” is or even if such a definition can even be determined, the consequence appears to be that it is to be defined negatively since a general agreement exists among questers that whatever the “historical Jesus” is or was, He is not, indeed cannot be, equated fully with the Jesus who is presented in the gospels. Since historiography, i.e. hypotheses of what can take place in a time-space continuum in reference to historical-critical ideology, cannot encompass the supernatural, indeed, rules it out from the very beginning, whatever the “historical Jesus” is, He cannot be equated with the Jesus as He is presented in the gospels.⁵

The Existential Jesus or What Does the “Historical Jesus” Mean to You?

As a result, the term “historical Jesus” is perhaps best termed the “existential Jesus,” for, as will be seen, a close examination of the questing reveals that the “historical Jesus” is whatever the quester *a priori* determines Jesus to be or wants Him as somehow significantly in distinction from the biblical documents. This subjectivity is highlighted in reviewing terms used today in the “third search” to define the “historical Jesus”: an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occult magician, an innovative rabbi, a trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, a political revolutionary, an Essene conspirator, an itinerant exorcist, an historicized myth, a protoliberation theologian, a peasant artisan, a Torah-observant Pharisee, a Cynic-like philosopher, a self-conscious eschatological agent, and the list would go on and on.⁶ No one embraces all of these images, but they are presented by their

³ James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1959), 26–27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

⁵ For further discussion of the operating agenda of historical criticism, see F. David Farnell, “The Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, ed. Robert Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 85–131; Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, ed. Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Ernest Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” (1898), in *Religion in History*. Essays translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense with an Introduction by James Luther Adams (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32.

⁶ For these various portraits of what or whom the “historical Jesus” has been in the search since its beginnings to the present day, consult Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery from the first German edition, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906). Introduction by James M. Robinson (New York: MacMillan, 1968); Walter P. Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the*

advocates as the most reasonable reconstruction of “the historical Jesus.” After an arbitrary *a priori* decision has been made on a preconceived concept of Jesus, criteria of authenticity, stemming from tradition criticism, can be applied to the gospels and that concept of Jesus affirmed. Since the criteria are subjective and conflicting, other criteria can be invented and applied to ensure the desired outcome. The critical weakness, as well as subjectivity, of these criteria lies in the fact that the same criteria can be applied or countered with different criteria to ensure whatever view has already been assumed.⁷ The current situation of widely conflicting views on who the “historical Jesus” was has prompted Jesus Seminar participant John Dominic Crossan to comment, “*Historical Jesus research* today is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke” and “an academic embarrassment” as well as giving the “impression of acute scholarly subjectivity in historical research.”⁸

Philosophical Context of Searching

The Rise of Hostile, Alien Philosophies Creates a Chasm Between Gospels and the Jesus in History

One cannot overstate that the rise of modern *philosophical* ideologies inherent in historical criticism generates such distinctions between Jesus as He is presented in the canonical gospels and any conceptualizations of how He is alleged to have been actually in history. Hostile philosophical underpinnings of the ideology in terms of a virulent *anti-supernaturalism* create these hypothetical distinctions.⁹ *The overarching intent in these searches is the destruction of the influence of the gospels, as well as the church, over society.*

Searching Defined

The “questing” or searching for the historical Jesus may be defined as a *philosophically-motivated historical-critical* construct that the Jesus as presented in the gospels is not the same or not to be identified fully with the Jesus who actually lived in history. Underlying the questing is the assumption that “scientific” research showed that the Jesus of history was different from the Christ of Scripture, the creeds, orthodox theology, and Christian piety.¹⁰ To some degree or another, such an activity has an underlying operating assumption that the gospels cannot be

Twentieth Century 1900–1950 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1999); John K. Riches, *A Century of New Testament Study* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1993); James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

⁷ For discussion of these criteria of authenticity as conflicting, see F. David Farnell, “Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 199–207. As will be shown in this article, the “Third” quest has developed additional criteria of authenticity.

⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus, The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), xxvii—xxviii and xviii.

⁹ For a much more detailed discussion, see “The Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism, in *The Jesus Crisis*.

¹⁰ See Colin Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds., Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 326.

taken as wholly trustworthy in their presentation of Jesus’ life since belief or faith has mediated their presentation. In other words, faith and history are perceived as in opposition in reference to proper or legitimate historical methods, due to their standard pronouncement of a closed-continuum of cause and effect. This idea of historiography means that the phrase “historical Jesus” is oxymoronic. If Jesus is to be understood historically, according to the standards of accepted historiography replete in the ideology of historical criticism, then He cannot be the Jesus presented in the gospels. If one accepts the Jesus in the gospels, then such a Jesus is not historical. One must default to a departure from the New Testament presentation of Jesus out of perceived necessity so that the “historical Jesus” *must be* something other than exactly the Jesus of the gospels.¹¹

Presuppositional philosophical underpinnings of historical criticism have driven a qualitative as well as quantitative wedge between how Jesus is presented in the gospels and current hypothesizing as to how Jesus actually was alleged to be in history in ALL quests for the “historical Jesus.” This philosophical, presuppositional basis for the “historical Jesus” or the “Jesus of history” results in a Jesus removed from the supernatural as well as much of the uniqueness of Jesus as He is presented in the gospels. The degree of separation is, admittedly, somewhat one of degree, depending on the philosophical underpinnings arbitrarily accepted by the individual “searcher,” but usually, it is a very sharp separation, especially in terms of any violation of a closed-continuum of cause and effect. As a result, biblical scholars who follow this mode of thought are forced *a priori* to “search” for the historical Jesus to find how He actually was in reality. Importantly, the idea of a “historical Jesus” distinct from the gospel presentations, as well as practice of “questing” or “searching” for this presumed historical Jesus, is an axiomatic consequence foundational to the tenets of historical criticism. The more one is consistent with the application of historical-critical ideology, the further the concept of a “historical Jesus” is removed from the gospel presentation of Him. To put it bluntly, the “historical Jesus” is a *chimera* of historical criticism that has at its basis philosophical motivations. The great irony is that the true “myth” of historical criticism is its idea of the “historical Jesus.”

Baruch Spinoza Stimulated the Questing

Questing is usually traced to the Enlightenment as its stimulating force, for it was during this period that a strong “prejudice against prejudice” was developed, whereby scholars rejected previous opinions of the ancients as tenuous.¹² Whatever the ancient early church said about the gospels in terms of their authorship or integrity was rejected in favor of more current approaches of the time. While very few ideas stem from absolute beginnings or a single root cause, the nascent beginnings of the historical-critical ideology of all these searches actually can be largely traced to the profound, albeit belated influence of the Jewish apostate Benedict Spinoza

¹¹ Hagner, “An Analysis of Recent ‘Historical Jesus’ Studies,” 83.

¹² Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics, Why Three Synoptic Gospels?* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987), 111.

(1632–1677).¹³ Spinoza, to a large degree, may truly be regarded as the progenitor or father of modern historical criticism of the Bible. Spinoza himself was a rationalist and pantheist, who for overriding personal reasons, disdained the plain meaning of the biblical text because of the implications as well as effect that it had upon him as a person as well as society as a whole.¹⁴

Spinoza's method had a simplistic genius behind it. He set in motion the modern nature of biblical criticism "*as a weapon to destroy or at least discredit the traditional metaphysics of Christianity and Judaism.*"¹⁵ Its purpose was to remove all influence of the Bible, not only in the religious sphere, but also in the economic as well as political areas of society. Commenting on the antecedent developments of historical-critical ideology, Dungan relates,

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground. That, however, was precisely the intended effect of the first step: to create an endless "nominalist barrage" if you will, an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them *could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations* of the Bible. In other words, Spinoza switched the focus from the *referent* of the biblical text (e.g., God's activity, Jesus Christ) to *the history of the text*. In doing so, he effectively eviscerated the Bible of all traditional theological meaning and moral teaching.¹⁶

Dungan goes on to comment, "In short, the net effect of what historical critics have accomplished during the past three hundred years—apart from accumulating an enormous heap of data about the physical history of the text—has been to eviscerate the Bible's core religious beliefs and moral values, preventing the Bible from questioning the political and economic beliefs of the new bourgeois class [that arose in the modern historical-critical era]."¹⁷ The German philosopher, Heinrich Heine, remarked well: "All of our contemporary philosophers, perhaps often without

¹³ See Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2006), 199–234

¹⁴ For an excellent overview of Spinoza's ideology, as well as other factors that gave rise to historical criticism, especially in terms of the synoptic "problem," see David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 171–176; 198–260; see also Norman L. Geisler, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 316–320; Farnell, "Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism," in *The Jesus Crisis*, 89–92.

¹⁵ Dungan, 199. Emphases in original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174 cf. 171. Dungan goes so far as to say that "modern biblical hermeneutics [i.e. historical criticism] was an essential part of the main attack on the traditional institutions of Throne and Altar."

knowing it, see through the lenses ground by Baruch Spinoza.”¹⁸ This helped create deist Lessing’s “ugly ditch” of a large, unknowable gap between the Jesus as He was in history and the Christ of faith (miracles of Jesus and especially His resurrection): “That, then, is the ugly ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.”¹⁹

How Many Searches Have Been Conducted for the “Historical Jesus”?

New Testament scholarship today predominantly identifies at least three major periods in questing for the “historical Jesus.” Debate, however, still surrounds how many searches have been conducted or whether all searches conducted have been really one unified search operating from these common philosophical roots. Reumann’s scheme is widely followed:

- I. The Old Quest (from 1778, according to Schweitzer, with its four either/or decisions: Purely historical or supernatural? Synoptics or John? Eschatological Jesus or not? Mark as a whole the basis for a “life” or Christology as post-Easter?)
- II. The No-Quest Period (Bultmann and the form critics: all gospel accounts are colored by the church; or, the “no biography is possible” view)
- III. Now, the New Quest and its fragmentation (Reumann 1974)²⁰

To this prevalent scheme must be added what has now become entitled “The Third Quest” for the historical Jesus, widely popularized at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This Third Quest has received its major impetus and name from British theologian Tom Wright, proposing this new term “Third Quest” in a 1982 article and also in his update of Stephen Neill’s work on a historical sweep of New Testament study, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1961–1986*.²¹ It has become an all-inclusive term to designate all historical Jesus research since the late 1970s and early 1980s.²² Wright comments,

Stephen Neill was correct to write in 1962 that ‘the historical reconstruction of the life and history of Jesus has yet hardly begun,’ but he could not have written those words today. For, while the so-called ‘New Quest’ was

¹⁸ For the tremendous influence of Spinoza on subsequent philosophers in Germany, see Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: University Press, 2007) xx, 50–54, 59, 99, 108, 110 (quote from p. 187).

¹⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lessing’s Theological Writings*. Selection in translation with an introductory essay by Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University, 1957), 55.

²⁰ John Reumann, “Jesus and Christology,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 502.

²¹ See N. T. Wright, “Towards a Third ‘Quest’? Jesus Then and Now,” *ARC* 10, No. 1 (Autumn 1982): 20–27; Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*. New Edition. Second edition by Stephen Neill and Tom Wright (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988 [1964]).

²² Beilby and Eddy, *The Historical Jesus Five Views*, 29.

still cautiously arguing about presuppositions and methods, producing lengthy histories of tradition out of which could be squeezed one or two more drops of authentic Jesus-material [Schillebeeckx], a quite different movement was beginning in a variety of places and with no unified background or programme. Fortified by Jewish materials now more readily available, these scholars worked as historians, under no doubt that it is quite possible to know quite a lot about Jesus of Nazareth and that it is worth-while to do so—the two things which the orthodox Bultmann school had denied. This movement of scholarship has become so pronounced that it is not fanciful to talk in terms of a ‘Third Quest.’²³

For Wright, this Third Quest could be separated from the other quests for three essential reasons:

First, much of the last century (from Schweitzer to Käsemann, if you like) has *not* been trying to find Jesus—in fact, it has been spent by theologians actually trying *not* to find him, lest they base their faith on history and so corrupt it. Secondly, this non-quest of the first half of the century was undertaken (if one may so speak) for . . . the desire to preserve orthodoxy and to protect ordinary Christians from the ravages of historical criticism. Conversely, where the Quest has been and is undertaken, the pious and orthodox are not noticeably welcoming it with open arms. One does not see copies of Vermes’s *Jesus the Jew* or Sander’s *Jesus and Judaism* on too many church bookstalls. Thirdly, actual historical enquiry after Jesus has not reached an impasse: it could not have, since until a few years ago it had hardly started, and in fact shows every sign of healthy young growth, needing pruning sooner or later no doubt, but at the moment to be encouraged.²⁴

Wright’s profound influence today among theologians has been a major factor in what is now seen as another attempt at searching for the historical Jesus.²⁵ Importantly, he claims that this “Third Quest” displays “a real attempt to do history seriously” [in contrast to the other periods where historiography was so negative].²⁶ It also stands in contrast to other quests in that it displays a holistic approach to Jesus that attempts to place Him within a large-scale, fleshed-out hypothesis within His Jewish context rather than the atomistic approach of other searches that surrounds bits of Jesus’ words as exemplified in the Jesus Seminar activities.²⁷

²³ Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 379.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 379–80.

²⁵ *Christianity Today* in 1999 declared N. T. Wright one of the “top scholars” in the church at the end of the Twentieth century. His influence has been profound. See Tim Stafford, “The New Theologians,” *Christianity Today* (February 8, 1999), 30–49.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 in *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 85.

²⁷ Beilby and Eddy, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 39 cp. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Minneapolis, 1992), 98–120; Donald L. Denton, Jr., *Historiography*

The First or Old Quest (1778–1906)

This first quest or “old quest” is marked from the work of Deist Reimarus (1694–1768—promoted by Librarian Lessing)²⁸ to Wrede (1859–1906).²⁹ Although this quest was largely influenced by German theologians, English Deistic influence was well-known to them as seen with Reimarus. However, the real roots of this quest go back to the rationalist Spinoza (d. 1677).³⁰ This first search for the historical Jesus was well-documented in Schweitzer’s famous work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (German title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*), whose incisive conclusion was that these questers only succeeded in making a Jesus in their own image, noting: “He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.”³¹ In other words, they reflected in a mirror how they wanted Jesus to appear existentially, “a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”³² Schweitzer was also guilty of the same rationalistic and existentialist interpretations that he recognized in others, and wanted to perceive Jesus eschatologically. His view, however, on the purpose of the “search” for “historical Jesus” was frank and honest, “*The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma. Afterwards when it was freed from this παθος it sought to present the historical Jesus in a form intelligible to its own time.*” [italics added].³³ This statement confirms that the first search was solidly anchored with the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of Christianity as a governing influence in society. It also did not seek Jesus as presented in Scripture but a Jesus that was compatible with modernism and anti-supernaturalism. Martin Kähler called “the entire Life-of-Jesus movement” during this time as “a blind alley” as well as “[t]he impossibility of [writing] a biography of Jesus.”³⁴ All paths, even Schweitzer’s, were “dead ends” due to their presuppositions that affected their virulently negative concept of historiography.

and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer, Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus Supplement Series, ed. Robert L. Webb (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 154–67.

²⁸ See “Introduction” in *Reimarus: Fragments* for an overview of Reimarus’ life and Lessing’s promotion of his work, 1–43.

²⁹ *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, 1901.

³⁰ Brown notes that this tracing of the first search back to Reimarus is due to the influence of Schweitzer’s *Quest* in 1906. See Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought 1778–1860*, 1.

³¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 398.

³² George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads*. Third Impression (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 44.

³³ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 4.

³⁴ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*. Forward by Paul J. Tillich. Translated, edited, and introduction by Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 46.

The So-called No Quest Period (1906–1953)

The demise of the “First” or “Old Quest” and entrance into the “No Quest” period is largely attributed to the work of Schweitzer as well as later in the period to Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). Wrede’s impact in his “Messianic Secret” of Mark expressing theology through the vehicle of a pseudo-historical framework had a significant impact during this period. The term “No Quest” is largely a misnomer, however, since Jesus research continued—it never stopped. Due to this influence of the presuppositions of the First Quest, this period’s historiography was still decidedly negative, especially in German circles.

The New or Second Quest (1953–1988)

The minimalistic, negative state of affairs regarding historical Jesus studies was not substantially changed by the inauguration of the “New” or “Second” Quest. Moreover, the advent of redaction criticism after World War 2 created emphasis on another layer of tradition that prevented investigators from discovering Jesus’ personal teaching, i.e., that of the unknown evangelists or composers of the gospel who conveyed not only the church’s theology but also their own particular theological biases. Ironically, Bultmann’s own students reacted against some of his negative historical assessments. Yet, their reassessment did not really change the state of affairs in the search for the historical Jesus to any significant degree in terms of historiography. The “New Quest” was dominated by the same negative presuppositions and methods as the Old Quest with some slight changes in emphasis and approach. This movement was sparked by Ernst Käsemann in his “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” which was a lecture given at the reunion of former Marburg students on October 20, 1953.³⁵ A former student of Bultmann, Käsemann stated: “I now find myself at variance with my own past, with the school of theology in which I grew up and particularly with my teacher, Bultmann.”³⁶

He reacted to two of his teacher’s basic propositions that Bultmann had maintained for a long time: (1) nothing could be known about the historical Jesus and (2) no continuity exists between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the church.³⁷ Instead, Käsemann argued that “there are still pieces of the Synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic if he wishes to remain an historian at all.”³⁸ That is, something had to be acknowledged as able to be known about the “historical Jesus” for the searching to have any substantive material to continue investigating and, as a result, one must allow that some continuity existed

³⁵ See Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*. Trans. by W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982 [1964 SCM]), 15–47. This was first published *ZTK* 51 (1954) 125–53.

³⁶ Käsemann, “Preface to the English Edition,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 8.

³⁷ In later life, Robinson noted that Bultmann had eventually come to acknowledge that something could be known. Robinson commented, “Bultmann himself has conceded in a letter to me the possibility and legitimacy of the [new] quest.” See James M. Robinson, “The Historical Question,” *The Christian Century* 76 (October 21, 1959): 1210.

³⁸ Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” 46.

between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the church. This minimalistic material acknowledged could keep the search on-going. Hence, Käsemann proposed that with the “utmost caution and reserve” something may be reconstructed “like a life of Jesus.”³⁹

Käsemann also continued to place great stress on the work of form criticism, noting that “the obligation now laid upon us is to investigate and make credible not the possible unauthenticity of the individual unit of material but, on the contrary, its genuineness.”⁴⁰ He continued,

We can only sketch in a few bold strokes the embarrassment of critical research. It lies in this: while the historical credibility of the Synoptic tradition has become doubtful all along the line, yet at the same time we are still short of one essential requisite for the identification of the authentic Jesus material, namely, a conspectus of the very earliest stage of primitive Christian history; and also there is an almost complete lack of satisfactory and water-tight criteria for this material. In only one case do we have more or less safe ground under our feet; when there are no grounds either for deriving a tradition from Judaism or for ascribing it to primitive Christianity, and especially when Jewish Christianity has mitigated or modified the received tradition, as having been too bold for its taste.⁴¹

This statement’s intent is clearly pessimistic about the possibility of questing for the “historical Jesus” and rests heavily upon the criterion of dissimilarity. This latter criterion was first formulated by his mentor, Bultmann, as part of the development of form criticism during its period of highest skepticism in Jesus research or the “no quest” period.⁴² Dahl, recognizing the implications, related that such a criterion resulted in a minimalistic Jesus or what is euphemistically termed “a critically assured *minimum*” [italics in original] of Jesus tradition. Other prominent German scholars who participated in the New or Second Quest were Günther Bornkamm and Hans Conzelmann.

In the English speaking world, two leading proponents of the second quest stand out, James M. Robinson and Norman Perrin. In 1959, Robinson’s work, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*,⁴³ was both a history and defense for this Second Quest that had been taking place among pupils of Bultmann. Robinson declared the first quest impossible and illegitimate. Instead, the gospels were to be understood as “kerygmatic” products, reflecting the faith of the early church.⁴⁴ The Old Quest’s objectifying historiography must be replaced by an existentialist histo-

³⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 36–37.

⁴² Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. Revised Edition. Reprint by Hendricksen Publishers (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1963), 205; also Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 12–13.

⁴³ James M. Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus and other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983 [1959]).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 44–47

riography. His historiography remains quite negative, for he maintains “modern historiography mediates an existential encounter with Jesus.”⁴⁵ Central to his quest is that the “modern historical methodology” should be the basis of that quest, i.e. historical criticism, and that one must “recognize its limitations” for identifying “historical material.”⁴⁶

One can only wonder if such differences between the first and second quests were that qualitatively distinctive. Both quests remained overwhelmingly negative historiographically and both quests sought a Jesus that was acceptable only to them, so long as it was decidedly not the same as the portrayal of Jesus in the gospels with any of its supernatural content. *Once again, Robinson's frank statement that the “historical Jesus” cannot be the same as the Jesus portrayed in the New Testament demonstrates firmly that the second quest allied itself with the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of the gospels and Christianity from society.*⁴⁷ This second quest was increasingly characterized as at a “dead-end.”⁴⁸

Here Come the British: The Most Recent Third Quest (1988–)

The beginnings of what is now being termed the “Third Quest” are not easily marked by a particular year but seem to have been gradually implemented through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Some choose 1985 with the publication of E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, which continued a similar line of thinking of placing Jesus within Judaism as Sanders' approach had done with Paul in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977).⁴⁹ Others mark 1988 with Neill and Wright's *History of Interpretation* who coined the phrase, “the Third Search” in his 1982 article cited in the discussion above. Wright himself cites twenty scholars as particularly important to developing the third quest from the year 1965 to the present.⁵⁰ What can be said, therefore, is that somewhere in the latter third of the twentieth century, another attempt was brewing to search for the historical Jesus. The place of the Jesus Seminar (1995), though within this period of time, receives debate also. For Wright, the Jesus Seminar is really a continuation of the old “new quest,” although this work received great prominence after the publication of books that Wright assigned to the Third Quest.⁵¹ However, Johnson, in his *Real Jesus* (1996) declared that “The Jesus Seminar likes to think of itself as the vanguard of the ‘Third Quest.’”⁵²

While the first two quests for the historical Jesus were largely German inspired, this “third” quest has been stimulated, although not exclusively, by British

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁷ See above, p. 5 as well as James M. Robinson, *A New Quest*, 26–27.

⁴⁸ James I. H. MacDonald, “New Quest—Dead End? So What about the Historical Jesus?,” *Studia Biblica* 1978: II Papers on the Gospels, ed. E. A. Livingstone. Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield University 1980), 152.

⁴⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

⁵⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 84.

⁵¹ See Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” 799, where he places the Jesus Seminar under the New or Second Quest.

⁵² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 4.

and British-trained theologians like N. T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn, although both have been also stimulated by Sanders’ thinking regarding Judaism as a key factor of their theological research. Braaten observed, “now at the end of this century [twentieth] a ‘Third Quest’ is underway. Its headquarters are no longer in Germany, but in the English speaking realm of theology.”⁵³ Among terms used today to define the “historical Jesus” in the Third Quest are an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occult magician, an innovative rabbi, a trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, a political revolutionary, an Essene conspirator, an itinerant exorcist, an historicized myth, a protoliberation theologian, a peasant artisan, a Torah-observant Pharisee, a Cynic-like philosopher, a self-conscious eschatological agent, and the list would go on. No one embraces all of these images but they are presented by their advocates as the most reasonable reconstruction of “the historical Jesus.” These diverse and often conflicting images of Jesus in the Third Quest bear a “striking resemblance” to the First Quest in the “sheer fantastic variety of images of Jesus,” all claiming to be based on documentary evidence and soberly sketched by using the most scientific methods of historical-critical scholarship,” with a similar goal to that of the First Quest of presenting a Jesus that is acceptable to the searcher in marked distinction to that of the gospels.⁵⁴

Some of the same theologians who have been largely influential in stimulating the “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) have also been influential in giving new stimulus to this “New Perspectives [PLURAL] on Jesus” (NPJ) known in the Third Quest: N. T. Wright, E. P. Sanders and James Dunn.⁵⁵ These two theological movements seem to share a similar motivation at times. As the New Perspective on Paul sought to bring Paul in more correlation with his Semitic roots in contrast to a perceived German Lutheran distortion of him at the Reformation, so also this new search for the historical Jesus seeks to reconcile Jesus with His Jewish roots.⁵⁶ This hints at one prominent theme in the Third Quest, to rescue any concept of Jesus from liberal German Protestantism of the previous two quests and root him in first century context of Judaism, with its particular religious, political, economic and social condition. This third search for Jesus is also marked by some unanimity in approach but much more divergence, while at the same time expressing an even larger degree of complexity and diversity among participants. This situation makes characterization even more difficult. Wright remarked, “The current wave of books about Jesus offers a bewildering range of competing hypotheses. There is no unifying theological agenda; no final agreement on method; certainly no common set of results.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Braaten, “Jesus and the Church,” 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁵ See F. David Farnell, “The New Perspective on Paul: Its Basic Tenets, History and Presuppositions,” *MSJ* 16, No. 2 (Fall 2005): 189–243.

⁵⁶ See Peter M. Head, “The Nazi Quest for an Aryan Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2.1 (January 2004): 55–89.

⁵⁷ Wright, “Jesus, Quest for the Historical,” 800.

The Third Is Like the Second Is Like the First Quest or the Old Is New Again!

The Third Quest has a striking resemblance to the First and Second Quests, all being expressions of the results of historical-critical ideology that are used to make a Jesus acceptable to the interpreter who conducts the “search.” This difficulty is born out in a survey of the various pictures that have been produced concerning the “historical Jesus” in this third period. Pelikan, in his book, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, depicts the many ways Jesus has been imaged: from the Rabbi of first-century Judaism, to the Cosmic Christ of Christianized Platonic Philosophy, through to the Teacher of Common Sense in the first quest, the Poet of the Spirit of Romanticism and the Liberator in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁸ Importantly, these images arose as a consequence of interpreters departing from the gospels as the sole, credible source of who Jesus truly was by the eyewitnesses who wrote of His ministry. One is reminded of Schweitzer’s words regarding the acute subjectivity of the First Search, “*But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of the life of Jesus [italics added].*”⁵⁹

The results of this Third Quest so far are no different, no less acutely subjective. Wright, in citing the twenty scholars as “particularly important within the Third Quest,” made a tell-tale remark, “Anyone familiar with these books will at once see how very different many of them are from each other, and yet how similar are the questions being addressed.”⁶⁰ This period, therefore, would include not only the radical results of *The Jesus Seminar* (1995), but also now evangelical questors who have come on board. In the most recent work, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (2009), the spectrum of “who is Jesus” ranges from Robert Price (The vanishing or non-existent Jesus), to John Dominic Crossan’s nominalistic Jesus as Galilean Jew within Judaism within the Roman Empire, to Luke Timothy Johnson’s the literary-portrayed or narrative Jesus as a character in the gospels, to Dunn’s Jewish Jesus, to one evangelical’s Jesus of the gospels in the historical Jesus who was Jewish messiah. Telling also is that when the latter attempts to identify Jesus more fully with the gospels, he is criticized for his subjective “‘evangelical’ reading . . . from the pages of the gospels, no criticism necessary.”⁶¹

Is There Truly, Really, Honestly a “Third” Quest?

With the resultant failure of the first two “quests” for the historical Jesus based upon historical-critical ideological lines, the Third-Quest for the historical

⁵⁸ Jaraslov Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1985).

⁵⁹ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 4.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 84.

⁶¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Response to Darrell Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* 294; Dunn also similarly criticizes Bock for his evangelical imposition (i.e. resembling the canonical gospels too closely) on his search for Jesus. See Dunn, “Response to Darrell Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 299–300.

Jesus has now been declared at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. As has been related, this label of the “Third Quest” has come from Tom Wright in a 1982 article “Towards a Third ‘Quest’?” as the earliest marker that would distinguish the “new” or “second” quest from what is now taking place and later was placed in his update of *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*. In protesting this “Third” search designation, Porter’s observation about one unified search is quite telling:

There is a great deal of evidence that there has always been just one multi-faceted quest for the historical Jesus. This quest has undergone development in a number of ways and in different circles, though not all in the same way or to the same degree . . . this quest is also unified by a fundamental underlying attempt to discover the proper means to be able to speak of the historical Jesus. This unbroken line of scholarly investigation reveals more than a century of ongoing research, one that cannot be easily dismissed.⁶²

Porter goes so far as to say that “Wright has engaged in what appears to be his own form of historical revisionism, reading his ‘third quest’ back even much earlier.”⁶³ What would appear to buttress Porter’s contention is that “there is little in this ‘third quest’ that cannot be seen in continuity with previous questing after the historical Jesus.”⁶⁴ All searches share the same ideological basis in historical criticism, in spite of recent protests or denials.

Although there are differences in emphasis and a wide-variety of conclusions regarding the “life of Jesus research” in this Third Quest, as with the Second Quest, a broad continuity exists in that (1) both agree that the historical Jesus can be reached to some greater extent (relative to the historiography of the searcher) than was thought in Bultmann’s day and (2) both operate under the assumption that historical-critical ideology is the operating hermeneutic as well as background materials supplied by other sources.⁶⁵ Keck insightfully notes, “THE MARKED [caps in original] differences among the three Quests should not obscure the continuity that results from the shared reliance on key aspects of historical-critical method and its judgments about the Gospels and early Christianity. Basic for all three Quests is the view that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and Q, and that between Jesus and all written sources stands oral tradition which shaped and expanded the Jesus materials, so that recovering the Jesus of history entails differentiating what the texts report from what Jesus really said and did.”⁶⁶ Yet, great diversity has earned it the tag of a “consensusless consensus.”⁶⁷

⁶² Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research*, 51–52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53 n. 58.

⁶⁵ Telford, “Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 34, 49–51.

⁶⁶ Leander Keck, “The Second Coming of the Liberal Jesus?” in *Christian Century* (August 31, 1994): 785–86.

⁶⁷ Eddy and Beilby, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 49.

Some Distinctives that Stand Out in the Third Quest

Several ideas stand out especially in the Third Quest: Firstly, a desire to place Jesus within the confines of first-century Judaism as received impetus in Sanders' work (noted above) and James Charlesworth's, *Jesus Within Judaism* (1988), where a growing interest in the relationship that Second Temple Jewish literature (e.g. OT Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Codices, Josephus) can shed light on Him. Charlesworth comments, "Jesus Research has become captivatingly rewarding. Today we can peruse some Jewish documents roughly contemporaneous with him, hearing terms, concepts, and dreams that were once considered unique to, or at least typical of, Jesus."⁶⁸ As will be seen, this also expresses itself in what is known as a "holistic" approach to studying Jesus, perhaps the term "big picture" of Jesus within Judaism could be used rather than "atomistic approach" of previous quests that concentrated on individual sayings of Jesus. This emphasis on Judaism and Jesus is perhaps the most salient endeavor in the Third Quest. Secondly, an emphasis on Jesus message as predominantly eschatological. Thirdly, some perceive a degree of greater optimism than in past searches regarding the historical reliability of traditions concern Jesus in the canonical gospels. Wright remarks about the Third Quest, "There is now a real attempt to do history seriously . . . Serious historical method, as opposed to the pseudo-historical use of home-made 'criteria,' is making a come-back in the Third Quest."⁶⁹ Thus, a perceived shift in historiography in terms of burden of proof have shifted away from the negativity of previous searches. The supernatural elements of the gospels, as will be seen, however, still remain problematic in the Third Quest among a large portion of the questers and as evidenced in their application of historical-critical ideologies (e.g. source, form/tradition and redaction). Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the following, while some in the third quest allow a modicum of history to the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, this third quest is still strongly allied to the Spinozan purpose of removing the influence of orthodox Christianity from impacting the modern world.

Important Personages in the Third Quest

Although a multiplicity of scholars have contributed to this new trend, the following individuals have played a very significant role in its development and are its important representatives today.

Ed Parish Sanders (1937–)

Strategic stimuli to this Third Quest helped solidify this current undertaking. The work of E. P. Sanders in his *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) must be given a

⁶⁸ James H. Charlesworth, "Preface," in *Jesus Within Judaism*. New York: Doubleday, 1988), ix.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 19.

very prominent position.⁷⁰ Besides his work in the “Third Quest,” Sanders is also sometimes characterized as the most influential scholar on Paul in the last quarter-century.⁷¹ He was also the catalyst who brought the New Perspective thinking in regard to the apostle Paul to the forefront of NT theology. His book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism, A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (1977) and its impact upon Pauline studies, led to a perceived collapse of the Reformational consensus regarding the Pauline view of the law.⁷² In this latter work, Sanders reveals an *a priori* among his “chief aims” that he is “trying to accomplish” as “to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship.”⁷³ Although he denies that this purpose is polemically biased in dealing with anti-Semitism,⁷⁴ he less than subtly reveals that his thinking is imbued with the *a priori* motivation of improving Judaism and Christian relations coupled with holocaustic hermeneutical pre-understanding so prevalent in NPP. It also reveals here that Sanders’ portrayal is intentionally designed to refute notions that Judaism in Jesus’ as well as Paul’s day was a religion of “legalistic works-righteousness.”⁷⁵

Sanders, in his writing, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), denies the apostolic origin of the canonical gospels, asserting that “[w]e do not know who wrote the gospels . . . These men—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—really lived, but we do not that they wrote gospels.”⁷⁶ Sanders strongly differentiates between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. He argues that the gospels are limited in their information about Jesus as a historical Jesus: “Nothing survives that was written by Jesus himself . . . The main sources for our knowledge of Jesus himself, the gospels in the New Testament, are, from the viewpoint of the historian, tainted by the fact that they were written by people who intended to glorify their hero”⁷⁷ and “the gospels report Jesus’ sayings and actions in a language that was not his own (he taught in Aramaic, the gospels are in Greek) . . . Even if we knew that we have his own words, we would still have to fear that he was quoted out of context.”⁷⁸ Again, he argues that the authors of the NT “may have revised their accounts to support their theology. The historian must also suspect that the ethical teaching that has so impressed the world has been enhanced by homiletical use and editorial improvements between the time of Jesus and the publication of the gospels.”⁷⁹ He also strongly affirms historical-critical ideologies centering in form and redaction-

⁷⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁷¹ Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xiii.

⁷² E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism, A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM & Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁶ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 63.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

critical principles, stating that “The earliest Christians did not write a narrative of Jesus’ life, but rather made use of, and thus preserved, individual units—short passages about his words and deeds. These units were later moved and arranged by editors and authors. This means that we can never be sure of the immediate context of Jesus’ sayings and actions” and “Some material [in the gospels] has been revised and some created by early Christians.”⁸⁰

Sanders denies the orthodox concept of the deity of Jesus, arguing “While it is conceivable that, in the one verse in the synoptic gospels that says that Jesus’ miracles provoked the acclamation ‘Son of God,’ the phrase means ‘more than human’, I doubt that this was Matthew’s meaning. In any case there is no reason whatsoever to attribute such an idea to the sympathizers and supports of Jesus. If Jesus’ followers in Galilee, or those who saw his miracles, ever said that he was Son of God, they would have meant what Matthew probably meant: he could rely on his heavenly Father to answer his prayers . . . This title . . . would not make Jesus absolutely unique.”⁸¹ And, “Jesus’ miracles as such proved nothing to most Galileans beyond the fact that he was on intimate terms with God . . . there appear to be two explanations of the relative lack of support for Jesus among the general populace. One is that the Gospels exaggerate Jesus’ miracles; the other is that miracles in any case did not lead most people to make an important commitment to the miracle-worker. Probably most Galileans heard of a few miracles—exorcisms and other healings—and regarded Jesus as a holy man, on intimate terms with God.”⁸² He also denies the virgin birth when he argues about Rom 8:14–17 in discussing the term “Son of God, “This is another passage that shows the definition of sonship as adoption . . . and he [Jesus] had been declared Son, not literally sired by God . . . Nor does the title require a story of a miraculous conception . . . The early Christians . . . used ‘Son of God’ of Jesus . . . They regarded ‘Son of God’ as a *high* designation, but we cannot go much beyond that.”⁸³

What Sanders did for his thinking regarding Paul he also applied to Jesus in His relationship to Judaism in *Jesus and Judaism*. In the work, he describes himself in the following terms: “I am a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low Christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that religious tradition stands for.”⁸⁴ Sanders takes as his starting point his idea, shared by a large portion of third questers, that previous quests failed to find Jesus for they relied upon an atomistic rather than holistic approach, that is, the other quests pursued an agenda surrounding Jesus’s speech or alleged authentic words rather than a holistic approach of placing Him within the context of first-century Judaism, as well as His deeds and activities. To Sanders, such an atomistic approach will never lead to a proper picture of Jesus: “[t]here are a few sayings on which there is wide consensus, but hardly enough to allow a full depiction of Je-

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁸⁴ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 334.

sus.”⁸⁵ While the Jesus Seminar took the atomistic approach by voting on words, Sanders proposed the holistic approach of what can be known of Jesus’ life. Sanders maintained that “one should begin with what is relatively secure and work out to more uncertain points.”⁸⁶ His study “is based primarily on the facts about Jesus and only secondarily on a study of some of the sayings material.”⁸⁷ Sanders lists as “almost indisputable facts” about Jesus the following:

1. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.
2. Jesus was a Galilean who preached and healed.
3. Jesus called disciples and spoke of there being twelve.
4. Jesus confined His activity to Israel.
5. Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple.
6. Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem by Roman authorities.
7. After His death, Jesus’ followers continued as an identifiable movement.
8. At least some Jews persecuted at least parts of the new movement (Gal. 1.13, 22; Phil. 3.6, and it appears that this persecution endured at least to a time near the end of Paul’s career (II Cor. 11.24; Gal. 5.11; 6.12; cf. Matt. 23.34; 10.17).⁸⁸

What is immediately revealed in such a list is that Sanders has entertained no supernatural events in his list of indisputable facts, revealing the still very negative underpinnings of the Third Quest. He established these events through the same historical-critical ideologies that have always been used, including criteria of authenticity. What Sanders has done is *a priori arbitrarily by his own choice, shifted the burden of proof toward a modicum of reliability of the historical traditions about Jesus* in the gospels due to prevalent scholarly emphases on placing Jesus within Judaism, “The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.”⁸⁹ His basic confidence in these events centers in the use of historical-critical ideology, especially the use of criteria of authenticity. His first and salient criterion is that of Jesus believably within the confines of Judaism. Sanders notes, “[a] good hypothesis with regard to Jesus’ intention and his relationship to Judaism should meet . . . [this] test: it should situate Jesus believably in Judaism and yet explain why the movement initiated by him eventually broke with Judaism.”⁹⁰ Such a criterion becomes a two-edged sword on credibility with Sanders, for he also uses it to discredit the gospel at points, especially when Judaism is portrayed in what he perceives as a bad light. For instance, in Matt 9:9–13 // Mark 2:13–17 // Luke 5:27–32 where the Pharisees appear censorious and critical, Sanders argues, “The story as such is ob-

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

viously unrealistic. We can hardly imagine Pharisees as policing Galilee to see whether or not an otherwise upright man ate with sinners.”⁹¹ At another place, using this criterion, he relates that John 7:49 and Luke 18:9–14, where the Pharisees are portrayed negatively, deny their historicity, arguing “[n]either passage can be regarded as actually indicating the views of Pharisaism before 70, and the second may reflect nothing other than Luke’s anti-Pharisaism.”⁹²

Sanders dismisses Matthew 5:17–20 (and related material) because of its making Jesus contrary to Judaism, “the evidence from the early church counts strongly against accepting the Jesus of Matt. 5:17–20 (and related material) as the historical Jesus.”⁹³ Again, regarding the Sermon on the Mount, due to its anti-law and anti-pharisaical language, he says, “I am inclined to reject the entire section, Matt. 5:17–6:18, except for the prayer (6:9–13).”⁹⁴ For Sanders, “the Jesus of Matt. 23:5–7, 23–26 is not the historical Jesus” and dismisses the substance of it.⁹⁵ For Sanders, these are later creations of the church and the evangelists revealing “anti-Judaism” existing in the church when they were written. To Sanders, only those events are credible that situate them within his own ideas of a believable description of Judaism. One might get the impression from Sanders that he is more interested in creating an apologetic for first century Judaism than he is in “finding” Jesus—at least the Jesus presented in entirety in the gospel presentation.

Two other interrelated criteria proposed by Sanders for an acceptable viewpoint of Jesus’ life are (1) that which offers a reasonable and well-grounded connection between Jesus’ activity and his death and (2) that which explains the continuation of the movement initiated by Jesus, which subsequently broke from Judaism. Sanders writes, “It is conceivable that Jesus taught one thing, that he was killed for something else, and that the disciples, after the resurrection, made of his life and death something else, so that there is no thread between his life, his death and the Christian movement. This is possible, but it is not satisfying historically.”⁹⁶

James D. G. Dunn

Another strategic figure in the “third search” is Dunn, who operates his historiographical assertions totally apart from any consideration of inspiration, whether orthodox or aberrant. Dunn, like Sanders, has been heavily influenced by historical-critical ideology, although he gives his own particular interpretations of it. Dunn asserts that the canonical gospels cannot produce a secure starting point to formulate Jesus’ theology, i.e., an accurate theology of Jesus from the gospels is not possible: “though a theology of Jesus would be more fascinating [than one of Paul], we have nothing firsthand from Jesus which can provide such a secure starting point. The theologies of the Evangelists are almost equally problematic, since their

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 263, 276–77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

focus on the ministry and teaching of Jesus makes their own theologies that much more allusive.”⁹⁷ In Dunn’s work, *Jesus Remembered* (2003), he states that third questers consider the neglect of the “Jewishness of Jesus” as “the most blatant disregard of history in the quest.”⁹⁸

For Dunn, questers at best can hope for “probability not certainty” in their approach to the gospels. He makes his own critical distinction between event, data, and fact in the formulation of historical events,

All the historian has available are the “data” which have come down through history—personal diaries, reminiscences of eyewitnesses, reports constructed from people who were present, perhaps some archaeological artefacts, as well as circumstantial data about climate, commercial practice, and laws of the time From these the historian attempts to reconstruct “facts.” The facts are not to be identified as data; they are always an *interpretation* [italics in original] of the data. Nor should the fact be identified with the event itself, though it will always be in some degree of approximation to the event. Where the data are abundant and consistent, the responsible historian may be confident of achieving a reasonably close approximation. Where they are much more fragmentary and often inconsistent, confidence in achieving a close approximation is bound to be much less. It is for this reason that the critical scholar learns to make carefully graded judgments which reflect the quality of the data—almost certain (never simply “certain”), very probable, probable, likely, possible, and so on. In historical scholarship the judgment “probable” is a very positive verdict. And given that more data always emerge—in ancient history, a new inscription or, prize of prizes, a new cache of scrolls or documents—any judgment will have to be provisional, always subject to the revision necessitated by new evidence or by new ways of evaluating the old evidence.⁹⁹

For Dunn, “‘facts’ properly speaking are always and never more than interpretations of the data. . . . The Gospel accounts are themselves such data or, if you like hard facts. But the events to which the gospels refer are not themselves ‘hard facts’; they are facts only in the sense that we interpret the text, together with such other data as we have, to reach a conclusion regarding the events as best we are able.”¹⁰⁰ The gospel “facts” are “interpretations of the data” regarding the events to which they refer. They do not have certainty since they are mediated through someone’s interpretation—the gospels are mediated through the evangelists’ interpretation of those events (“The possibility that later faith has in some degree covered over the historical actuality cannot be dismissed as out of the question.”). The consequence of his thinking is that “historical methodology can only

⁹⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 13.

⁹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 92.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102–3.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn, “Response to Darrell Bock,” *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 299.

produce probabilities, the probability that some event took place in such circumstances being greater or smaller, depending on the quality of the data and the perspective of the historical enquirer.”¹⁰¹

At best, to Dunn, the gospels may give probabilities, but certainty they are not factors in historiography. In references to miracles, Dunn relates,

It was the Enlightenment assumption that necessary truths of reason are like mathematical axioms, and that what is in view is the certain QED of mathematical proof that has skewed the whole question. But faith moves in a totally different realm from mathematics. The language of faith uses words like “confidence” and “assurance” rather than “certainty.” Faith deals in trust, not in mathematical calculations, nor in a “science” which methodologically doubts everything which can be doubted. Nor is it to be defined simply as “assent to propositions as true” (Newman). Walking “by faith” is different from walking ‘by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7). Faith is commitment, not just conviction.¹⁰²

To Dunn, “it is the ‘lust for certainty’ which leads to fundamentalism’s absolutising of its own faith claims and dismissal of others.”¹⁰³ In chastising evangelicals for their greater certainty regarding the gospel and its supernatural elements, he relates that only probability—not certainty—is the stinging “nettle” that evangelical Christians must grasp, qualifying his remark by noting that “genuinely critical historical inquiry is necessary if we are to get as close to the historical as possible. *Critical* [italics in original] here, and this is the point, should not be taken to mean negatively critical, hermeneutical suspicion, dismissal of any material that has overtones of Easter faith. It means, more straightforwardly, a careful scrutiny of all the relevant data to gain as accurate or as historically responsible a picture as possible.”¹⁰⁴ Dunn notes, “[i]n a day when *evangelical*, and even *Christian* [italics in original], is often identified with a strongly right-wing, conservative and even fundamentalist attitude toward the Bible, it is important that responsible evangelical scholars defend and advocate such critical historical inquiry.”¹⁰⁵ In this way, for Dunn, the term “evangelical (not to mention Christian) can again become a label that men and women of integrity and good will can respect and hope to learn from more than most seem to do today.”¹⁰⁶

Apparently, if one holds to certainty regarding such miracles as the resurrection, one moves into this criticism by Dunn. As to the greatest event in the gospels, the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:3), Dunn, comparing the passion accounts in the gospels to that of Second Temple Judaism’s literature, relates that Jesus’ hope for resurrection reflected more of the ideas of Second Temple Judaism’s concept of

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 299–300.

¹⁰² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 104.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰⁴ Dunn, “Response to Darrell Bock,” *The Historical Jesus Five Views*, 300.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

vindication hope of a general and final resurrection: “The probability remains, however, that any hope of resurrection entertained by Jesus himself was hope to share in the final resurrection.”¹⁰⁷ For Dunn, Jesus had in mind that “His death would introduce the final climactic period, to be followed shortly (‘after three days’?) by the general resurrection, the implementation of the new covenant, and the coming of the kingdom.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, even to speculate this much on the resurrection, he turns negative: “To be even able to say as much is to say more than historical questers have usually allowed.”¹⁰⁹ For Dunn, any proof of Jesus resurrection centers in the “impact made by Jesus as it impressed itself into the tradition.” This “impact summarized in the word ‘resurrection’ . . . requires us to concede that there was a something which happened ‘on the third day’ which could only be apprehended/conceptualized as ‘resurrection.’”¹¹⁰ Dunn summarizes his thinking on data and facts regarding the resurrection:

[T]he resurrection certainly cannot be numbered among the data which have come down to us. Nor can we speak of empty tomb and resurrection appearances as data. The data are *reports* [italics in original] of empty tomb and of seeing/visions of Jesus. If historical facts are *interpretations* [italics in original] of the data, then the historical facts in this case, properly speaking, are at best the fact of the empty tomb, and the fact that disciples saw Jesus. The conclusion, “Jesus has been raised from the dead,” is further interpretation, an interpretation of interpreted data, an interpretation of the facts. The resurrection of Jesus, in other words, is at best a second order “fact,” not a first order “fact”—an interpretation of an interpretation.¹¹¹

Dunn’s thinking here reflects the skepticism of Hume as well as Kant. Since Dunn praised Hume earlier, stating “As David Hume had earlier point out, it is more probable that the account of a miracle is an untrue account than the miracle recounted actually took place.”¹¹² So that Jesus was raised from the dead was an interpretation by the first disciples. For Dunn, this is why the resurrection of Jesus is so “problematic” for the twenty-first-century quester:

[T]he conclusion that “God has raised Jesus from the dead,” as a conclusion of the quest, is a further act of interpretation—again, an interpretation (evaluation) of the first-century interpretation (evaluation) of the first-century interpretation . . . that departure from this life (death) can be described as a historical event, whereas entry on to some further existence

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 821–24 (824).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 824.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 876.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 877.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 103–4.

can hardly be so described—it can be seen just how problematic it is to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as historical.¹¹³

Dunn also describes the term “resurrection” as a “metaphor” wherein he says that “the power of a metaphor is the power ‘to describe a reality inaccessible to direct description’ (Ricoeur), ‘reality depicting without pretending to be directly descriptive’ (Martin Soskice).” Thus, in Dunn’s thinking it defines an undefinable something—“*something which could not otherwise be said*” [italics in original]. Furthermore, “to translate ‘resurrection’ into something more ‘literal’ is not to translate it but to abandon it.” Finally, he notes,

Christians have continued to affirm the resurrection of Jesus, as I do, not because they know what it means. Rather, they do so because, like the affirmation of Jesus as God’s Son, “the resurrection of Jesus” has proved the most satisfying and enduring of a variety of options, all of them inadequate in one degree or other as human speech, to sum up the impact made by Jesus, the Christian perception of his significance . . . In short, the “resurrection of Jesus” is not so much a criterion of faith as a paradigm for hope.¹¹⁴

So Dunn offers us, as he did with Paul, “a new perspective on the Jesus tradition.”¹¹⁵

James H. Charlesworth

As with Sanders and Dunn, Charlesworth has been instrumental in placing Jesus within the Judaism of His day.¹¹⁶ He has advocated that a much greater importance be placed on Jewish Second Temple literature, “Work is progressing throughout the world in an attempt to ascertain how and in what ways Jewish writings help us understand the historical Jesus.”¹¹⁷ For him, previous pessimism regarding historiography is largely a thing of past quests, not the third. However, Charlesworth does allow that “the Gospels are from a later generation than Jesus’ own; but while the evangelists were not eyewitnesses, they were informed by eyewitnesses;” “the Gospels and other New Testament documents reflect the needs of the Church . . . dedication to historical tradition does not imply or demand perfection in transmission;” “the Gospels do contain legendary and mythical elements, such as Jesus’ walking on the water . . . While the presence of nonhistorical and nonverifiable legends and myths in the Gospels should be admitted, the basic story about Jesus derives from authentic and very early traditions.” And in the search for

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 877.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 878–79.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 881.

¹¹⁶ James H. Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” in *Images of Jesus Today*. Eds. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 5, 9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

authentic Jesus material, we must acknowledge . . . that inauthentic Jesus words may accurately preserve Jesus’ actual intentions.”¹¹⁸

His *The Historical Jesus An Essential Guide* (2008) has defended the Jewishness of Jesus and that the starting place in understanding Him must consider the increasing knowledge of Second Temple Judaism.¹¹⁹ It expresses much of the standard approach to studying Jesus in this Third Search period. Charlesworth, in his *Jesus Within Judaism*, encapsulates his new approach:

I once stood in admiration of New Testament scholars who are cautiously reticent until they can defend virtually infallible positions. Now I have grown impatient with those who feign perfection, failing to perceive that knowledge is conditioned by the observer . . . and missing the point that all data, including meaningful traditions, are categorically selected and interpreted phenomena. Moreover, such scholars have severely compromised the axiom that historians do not have the luxury of certainty; they work, at best with relative probabilities.

It is wise and prudent to be cautious; but, pushed to extremes, even a virtue can become a vice. As the rabbis stated, timidity is not a virtue in pursuing truth. The search for uninterpreted data, like Jesus’ own acts (*bruta facta Jesu*) and His very own words (*ipsissima verba Jesu*), erroneously implies that the historian can approximate certainty, miscasts the complex structure of the gospels, and betrays the fact that New Testament interpretation is an adventure.¹²⁰

To Charlesworth, the gospels, however, cannot serve as a totally reliable guide to understanding Jesus in first-century Judaism. He relates that, due to recent discoveries today, someone may portray a more accurate historical knowledge of Jesus than even the gospels present: “Jesus’ story was told by writers that we called the Evangelists in the first century C. E., less than one hundred years after his death. Two thousand years later, in some significant ways, we may more accurately retell the story of Jesus.”¹²¹ Why is this necessary? “Intensive examination” of the “widely held assumption” that Matthew and John were apostles who were in Jesus’ inner circle “have ended with sadness and failure.”¹²² He relates that “The Evangelists were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and thought If Matthew depends on Mark as a source, as most scholars think, and if Mark is either someone unknown or Peter’s scribe who never met Jesus, then Matthew cannot be the ‘Matthew’ of the Twelve. The Evangelists worked on traditions they received. Most of these came to

¹¹⁸ James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 19–20.

¹¹⁹ James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

¹²⁰ Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, 17–18.

¹²¹ Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus An Essential Guide*, xiii.

¹²² *Ibid.*

them in oral form and had taken share over three decades (from the 30s through the 50s at least).¹²³

Charlesworth supports modern scholarship in the idea that “the Evangelists composed their Gospels shortly before or long after 70 C.E. This year was a significant divide in Jewish history. In September of 70 C. E. . . . the Roman legions conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple, bringing an end to the history of ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. However, Jesus lived when the Temple defined Judaism Mark, Matthew, Luke and the author of the Gospel of Thomas forgot, or never knew, the vibrant, exciting, and diverse Jewish culture that shaped and framed Jesus’ brilliantly poetic insights John may be intermittently better informed of Jesus’ time than the first three evangelists” and “[John] must not be jettisoned from consideration in seeking to find the historical Jesus.”¹²⁴ Therefore, he contends that “[t]hanks to the recovery of a Jewish library containing scrolls once held by Jesus’ contemporaries—The Dead Sea Scrolls—we can read about the hopes of some of his fellow Jews and discern how they interpreted God’s word, Scripture.”

Studying these and other Jewish documents from Jesus’ time allow us to learn more about the terms and concepts presupposed by Jesus and his audience.” To Charlesworth, “It seems obvious now, given the date of the gospels and the struggle of the Evangelists to establish a claim that was unpopular to many Jews and Gentiles, that the evangelists missed much of the dynamism of the pre-70 world of Jesus and the Jewish context of his life and thought. These are now clearer to us because of the terms, concepts, and dreams preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that is, these documents that represent many aspects of Second Temple Judaism predate 70 C.E. and are not edited by later Jews or Christians.”¹²⁵

To Charlesworth the gospels present a problem in determining who the historical Jesus was because: “First, the evangelists sometimes significantly and deliberately edited Jesus’ sayings. Second, we have learned that it is imperative to distinguish between the Evangelists’ theology and Jesus’ thought.”¹²⁶ This process is compounded by the fact that “the Evangelists were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and thought.”¹²⁷ His solution to finding an accurate portrayal of Jesus as He truly was is to “[i]nclude all Gospels and extracanonical sources” and that “all relevant sources, literary and nonliterary (e.g. archaeology), should be collected for examination if we are to obtain a clearer and more representative picture of the man from Nazareth.”¹²⁸ Charlesworth does shift the burden of proof, noting that “we should also assume a tradition is authentic until evidence appears that undermines its authenticity. Only this position is faithful to the intention of our Evangelists. Within a few decades of Jesus’ death his followers handed on many reliable traditions I stress that some of those who had been with Jesus remained alive to preserve the

¹²³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

authenticity of many traditions. Most, but not all, of these traditions were shaped by oral teaching and preaching.”¹²⁹ Recent research has placed “a new, and promising, emphasis on the early nature, and reliability, of the traditions about Jesus. His original meaning is now widely seen as preserved in the Gospels, even though his exact words may be altered.”¹³⁰

Since “traditions about Jesus often are shaped by the belief about his resurrection and the needs of the post-Easter Palestinian Jesus Movement,” their works involve interpretation, i.e., “All canonical and extracanonical gospels are edited versions of Jesus traditions.” To get behind their interpretation and discern “reliable and meaningful information about Jesus’ action and message,” criteria of authenticity need to be applied to this tradition.

He cites five criteria as most important: (1) *Embarrassment*. Some deeds and sayings of Jesus were an embarrassment to the Evangelists, i.e., that which was embarrassing to the Evangelists would not have been invented by them; (2) *Dissimilarity*. This is only appropriate regarding Jesus’ sayings, especially in reference to the Christology and theology of the members of the Palestinian Jesus Movement, i.e., “if a saying is embarrassing or dissimilar to his followers’ way of thinking, then it most likely did not arise with them. Since it is attributed to Jesus by the Evangelists, it may well have originated with him.” These first two criteria of authenticity are the two most important; (3) *Multiple Attestation*, i.e., “a saying or action attributed to Jesus preserved in two or more independent primary sources is more probably original to Jesus than if it were found in only one source.” He includes the following hypothesized sources: Q, S—a possible sayings source used by John, P—Paul’s references to Jesus, Mark, J¹John (first edition of John), M—traditions inherited by Matthew, L—traditions inherited by Luke, A—preservation of Jesus traditions in Acts, J² (second edition of John) and T—*Gospel of Thomas*. Charlesworth admits, however, that this principle has its limits and that “it should be used only to include traditions that may ultimately originate with Jesus” and “It should not be used to reject as inauthentic a tradition that appears in only one source;” (4) *Coherence*. “When a deed or saying of Jesus is virtually identical with what has already been shown to be most likely authentic to Jesus, the deed or saying under scrutiny may also with some reliability be attributed to Jesus;” and (5) *Palestinian Jewish setting*, which “suggests that a tradition of Jesus may be authentic if it reflects his specific culture and time and not the world defined by the loss of Land and temple after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C. E.”¹³¹

Charlesworth also contends that an objective biography of Jesus is not possible. Basing this argument in the Documentary Hypothesis, Charlesworth argues:

As we search the sources for reliable traditions that may originate with Jesus, we should always remember that our first Evangelist, *Mark*, whoever he was, *never was with Jesus in Capernaum or Jerusalem*. That means he

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 20–25.

could not appeal to his own memory for clarifying when and where Jesus said or did something. The earliest evangelist was forced to create an order for Jesus' life. Mark's task may be compared to the attempts of someone who had broken a woman's pearl necklace and was forced to put the pearls back in their original order. That is as impossible as it was for Mark to re-create accurately the order of Jesus traditions.¹³²

N. T. Wright

N.T. Wright has been a profound influence on this "Third Search for the historical Jesus" as he has been for the New Perspective on Paul. In his *Jesus and the Victory of God*, he contends, "I still believe that the future of serious Jesus research lies with what I have called the 'Third Quest', within a broadly post-Schweitzerian frame."¹³³ As noted, this questing period, even its name, largely received its impetus from Wright's efforts. Although it is labeled as the least skeptical of the quests, this assertion about "least" is only relative in comparison to the other two quests, since it still remains heavily skeptical and continues the "search" for the "historical Jesus." Moreover, the question still remains as to whether a "Third" Quest actually should be distinguished from the "Second" Quest. Wright, who is largely responsible for promulgating this distinction, admits,

Does this flurry of activity belong with the older 'New Quest' [a.k.a. what Wright now labels the "Second Quest"], or with what I have called the 'Third Quest' From one point of view this is a mere matter of labels. It does not much matter whether we think of the "Jesus Seminar," and its key players such as Mack and Crossan, as being on the radical wing of the "Third Quest," or whether we recognize the major differences between them" [and others involved in this most recent questing].¹³⁴

Wright makes the distinction because of his personal demarcations that have become accepted now by others. He would have us believe that the New Quest is old (the Second Quest) and the "Third Quest" is new due to its emphasis on Jewish studies. It well could be just a matter of emphasis rather than distinction.¹³⁵ This statement reveals, nonetheless, that the so-called "Third Quest" may not be easily separated from the previous ones because it is still rooted in historical-critical ideologies and significant skepticism. Wright goes on to insist, "It would not . . . be

¹³² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 78.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³⁵ A demonstration that much subjectivity is involved in this distinction is found in John Reumann who sees Wright's so-called "Third Quest" as a part of the Second (or "New Quest"). John Reumann, "Jesus and Christology," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, 501–64. Wright's response is to contend that the majority support the idea of a "New Quest" and the paradigm needed time to become fully established. See Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 83–84. Nonetheless, great subjectivity is involved in determining the "Third Quest" from the "Second" or "New Quest" as well as both quests demonstrating significant skepticism.

much of a caricature to say that orthodoxy . . . has had no clear idea of the purpose of Jesus’ ministry.”¹³⁶

Adding more caution to Wright’s typical British-modifying approach are the following samplings of his ideological approach: Firstly, he affirms use of tradition criticism to the texts of the gospels (“criterion of dissimilarity”) but with “great caution,” which principle still assumes the burden of proof upon the gospels for authenticity no matter how much Wright tries to make it palatable to evangelicals;¹³⁷ secondly, Wright asserts, “The critics of form-criticism have not, to my knowledge, offered a serious alternative model to how the early church told its stories;”¹³⁸ thirdly, he refers to the gospel stories in terms of his own modified version of “myth”: “The gospels, then, are myth in the sense that they are foundational for the early Christian worldview. They *contain* ‘mythological’ language which we can learn, as historians, to decode in the light of ‘other apocalyptic’ writings of the time.”¹³⁹ For Wright, “Jesus and his contemporaries” did not take apocalyptic language “literally, as referring to the actual end of the time-space universe.”¹⁴⁰ Instead, “the language of myth, and eschatological myths in particular . . . are used in the biblical literature as complex metaphor systems to denote historical events and to invest them with their theological significance;”¹⁴¹ Wright is also very unclear as to his viewpoint regarding the authorship of the gospels, for he asserts, “I make no assumptions about the actual identity of the evangelists, and use the traditional names for simplicity only.”¹⁴²

Paraphrasing Acts 25:12, where Festus used Paul’s own words to sentence Paul to a hearing before Caesar, “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go” to send him to Rome, Wright rephrases this conversation as a guiding principle in the Third Search in regards to Christianity’s appeal to historical claims, “Christianity appeals to history; to history it must go.”¹⁴³ He argues that the Third Quest expresses a “real attempt to do history seriously” as opposed to the other quests.¹⁴⁴ As with Sanders, Dunn and Charlesworth, he lauds “a real willingness to be guided by first-century sources, and to see how Judaism of that period in all its complex pluriformity, with the help now available from modern studies of the history and literature of the period.”¹⁴⁵ As with the others, he prefers a holistic approach rather than an atomistic one, “We do not need to detach Jesus’ sayings from the rest of the evidence, and examine them in isolation.” Wright notes that Sanders’ holistic ap-

¹³⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 14.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³⁸ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 424.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 372 n. 4.

¹⁴³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

proach “is right.”¹⁴⁶ As with the others, he stresses that “Jesus must be understood as . . . a first-century Jew.”¹⁴⁷

Wright concurs with Charlesworth when the latter “tells of how he abandoned his previous admiration for New Testament scholars who were ‘cautiously reticent until they [could] defend virtually infallible positions.’”¹⁴⁸ For Wright, “the pursuit of truth—historical truth—is what the Third Quest is all about. Serious historical method, as opposed to the pseudo-historical use of home-made ‘criteria’, is making a comeback in the Third Quest. How much vaunted ‘normal critical tools’, particularly form-criticism, are being tacitly (and in my view rightly) bypassed in the search for Jesus; enquiry is proceeding by means of a proper, and often clearly articulated, method of hypothesis and verification.”¹⁴⁹

Wright goes on to note that “much of the impetus for form-critical and redaction-critical study came from the presuppositions that this or that piece of synoptic material about Jesus *could not* be historical . . . that *an historical hypothesis about Jesus could already be presupposed* which demanded a further tradition-historical hypothesis to explain the evidence.”¹⁵⁰ Instead, he prefers “a viable alternative historical hypothesis” about Jesus or the early church where “the need for tradition-criticism within the search for Jesus . . . could in principle be substantially reduced and altered in shape.”¹⁵¹ Wright cites the work of Sanders and Meyer as supporting his claim: “This is exactly what happens in the hypotheses of (say) Sanders and Meyer: all sorts of things in the gospels, which on the Bultmannian paradigm, needed to be explained by complex epicycles of *Traditionsgeschichte* turn out . . . to fit comfortably within the ministry of Jesus.”¹⁵² As regards the synoptic gospels, he argues, “It is becoming apparent that the authors of at least the synoptic gospels, which still provide the bulk of relevant source material, intended to write about Jesus, not just their own churches and theology, and they substantially succeeded in this intention.”¹⁵³

To Wright, this third quest has “certain solid advantages.” He lists three: (1) “it takes the total Jewish background seriously”; (2) “its practitioners have no united theological or political agenda, unlike the monochrome New Quest and its fairly monochrome renewal”; (3) “there has increasingly been a sense of homing in on the key questions which have to be asked to make progress.” He lists five key questions: Firstly, How does Jesus fit into Judaism? Secondly, What were Jesus’ aims? Thirdly, Why did Jesus die? Fourthly, How and why did the early church begin? And fifthly, Why are the gospels what they are?¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 86

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87; cp. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89–113.

In dealing with understanding Jesus’ miracles, for Wright it involves a “suspension of judgment.” He relates, “It is prudent, methodologically, to hold back from too hasty a judgment on what is actually possible and what is not within the space-time universe.”¹⁵⁵ He rejects extremes found in Hume, Lessing and Troeltsch as well as post-Enlightenment philosophy. He also rejects the views of “conservative apologists”: “The appeal for suspension of judgment . . . cannot be used as a Trojan horse for smuggling in an old-fashioned ‘supernaturalist’ worldview under the pretense of neutrality; this is sometimes done by conservative apologists, who are often interested at this point, not in Jesus himself, but in miracles as test cases for whether the Bible is believed to be ‘true’ or not—a position that brings its own nemesis.”¹⁵⁶ Instead, he argues that words used in the gospels for Jesus actions such as “*paradoxa*” (things one would not normally expect), “*dunameis*” (displays of power and authority) “*terata*,” or “*semeia*” (signs or portents) as well as “*thaumasia*” (marvels—Matt 21:15):

[D]o not carry, as the English word “miracle” has sometimes done, overtones of invasion from another world, or from outer space. They indicate, rather, that something has happened, *within* what we would call the “natural” world, which is not what would have been anticipated, and which seems to provide evidence for the active presence of an authority, a power, at work, not invading the created order as an alien force, but rather enabling it to be more truly itself. And that describes equally as well the impression that other aspects of Jesus’ ministry made on people: here was an unexpected phenomenon, a prophet apparently questioning the nationalistic hope.¹⁵⁷

Jesus’ mighty works are to be understood best in terms of Jesus’ proclamation as “signs that the kingdom of Israel’s god was indeed coming to birth.”¹⁵⁸ In terms of Jesus’ resurrection, after long discourse and many pages of equivocation, Wright argues that the early church believed “that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was held by virtually all early Christians for whom we have evidence.”¹⁵⁹ For Wright, the two factors that are “historically secure” about Easter are the emptiness of the tomb and the meetings with the risen Jesus.¹⁶⁰ Wright then argues for factors that caused this belief regarding Jesus’ resurrection. He distinguishes differences between necessary and sufficient conditions: a *necessary* condition is something that has to be the case for the conclusion to follow A *sufficient* condition is something that will certainly and without fail bring about the conclusion.¹⁶¹ While the empty tomb and appearances of Christ to the disciples are

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 685.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 686.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 687.

individually “insufficient to generate early Christian belief . . . they form, in combination, a sufficient condition.”¹⁶² The matter of the resurrection does, however, lie “beyond strict historical proof” since “[i]t will always be possible for ingenious historians to propose yet more variations on the theme of how early Christian belief could have arisen, and taken the shape that it did, without either an empty tomb or appearances of Jesus.”¹⁶³

Yet, Wright himself believes that both the empty tomb and the appearances both constitute necessary conditions for belief in Jesus’ resurrection: “We are left with the conclusion that the combination of the empty tomb and appearances of the living Jesus forms a set of circumstances which is itself *both necessary and sufficient* for the rise of early Christian belief.”¹⁶⁴ Such a belief “remains, of course, unprovable in logical or mathematical terms.”¹⁶⁵ Wright concludes that “the historian, of whatever has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and ‘meetings’ with Jesus as ‘historical events’ “. . . they took place as real events; they were significant events . . . they are . . . provable events.”¹⁶⁶ His claim is: “that the bodily resurrection of Jesus provides a *necessary* condition for these things; in other words, that no other explanation could or would do. All the other efforts to find alternative explanations fail.”¹⁶⁷ Wright admits that this does not constitute “‘proof’ of the resurrection in terms of some neutral standpoint. It is, rather, a historical challenge to other explanations, other worldviews.”¹⁶⁸ So with Wright, the resurrection cannot be proven with ideas of certainty, but perhaps that the evidence points to that conclusion as the most likely or probable conclusion.

The Basic Operating Procedures of the Third Quest¹⁶⁹

The basic operating procedures of the Third Quest share much in common with the first two searches: historical criticism. To be sure, some criteria have been modified as well as newly proposed (e.g. criteria of embarrassment, rejection and execution, and historical plausibility).¹⁷⁰ However, all three searches share much in common in spite of apparent diversity.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 692.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 694.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 696.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 706.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 709.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 717.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ For a thorough vetting of these approaches as well as their validity, once again consult Thomas and Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*.

¹⁷⁰ See Porter, “Table 2—“The Rise of the Criteria and the Development of Form and Redaction Criticism in ‘Quests’ for the Historical Jesus,” in *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical–Jesus Research*, 102.

Criteria of Authenticity¹⁷¹

The purpose of the criteria in the first two searches for the historical Jesus had design or intent behind them: to result in “a critically assured *minimum*” of gospel material to find a Jesus acceptable to the subjective biases of the searcher.¹⁷² Importantly, philosophical presuppositions were deliberately applied in the formulation of these criteria to guarantee a minimalistic Jesus to those who applied these criteria. An *a priori* operating bias resulted in criteria that guaranteed the result desired by the searcher. This is hardly a scientific approach. The apparent shift in burden of proof in the Third Search, however, has really happened by arbitrary, fiat decree. The consensus was that the previous two quests as well as the pause during Bultmann were too skeptical, so that third questers now have decided, largely on consensus, to allow for more historicity in broad or holistic terms. As seen with the writings of Charlesworth and Porter,¹⁷³ the Third Quest has suggested different criteria and modifications of existing ones. Much of a *similar negative bias* is seen in the criteria of many of the Third Search, although perhaps, depending on the quester, not to the same degree of dehistoricization (e.g. Sanders).

While the pessimism of Bultmann may be a thing of the past, *pessimism is still replete in the Third Quest*.¹⁷⁴ Even if third questers desire to move the burden of proof away from the replete skepticism of the first two questers, the application of such criteria immediately casts doubt on the substantive portion of the gospel material, requiring it to prove itself to the biases of the interpreter. Importantly, in this so-called “Third Quest,” instead of desiring “a critically assured *minimum*,” the third questers have desired to have a credibly assured *modicum* (slightly more historicity in broad outlines of Jesus’ life) and designed new criteria and modified old ones to ensure *a priori* that *modicum*.

In the above review of Sanders, Dunn, Charlesworth and Wright, the present writer has noted their desire to find a more holistic approach that allows for more historicity in the gospels. This goal is laudable. However, the same subjective bias is found in that the criteria of authenticity designed for this search have been *a priori* designed to ensure that very same desired outcome. Their criteria allow them to find a *modicum* of more historicity in broad outlines of Jesus’ life. The outcome is guaranteed based on their already perceived subjective bias as well as intent. These criteria, however, cut both ways, revealing their subjectivity in application.

Significantly, the criterion of Palestinian Judaism almost has as its unstated operating procedure something much like the criterion of embarrassment in Sanders’ application. Sanders is embarrassed by Jesus’ anti-Judaistic attitude many

¹⁷¹ The present writer has already discussed much of the usage of criteria of authenticity in the first two searches in *The Jesus Crisis* and the reader is referred there for a more lengthy discussion. See F. David Farnell, “Form and Tradition Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 203–7.

¹⁷² Nils A. Dahl, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Kerygma and History*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 156.

¹⁷³ Porter devoted half of one of his recent works to “recent developments in the criteria of authenticity,” *The Criteria of Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research*, 103–242.

¹⁷⁴ Brown, “Christology and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, 75.

times reported in the gospels. His application of the criterion of Judaism allows him to remove any material that would conflict with his intended desire to avoid embarrassment as a liberal Protestant trying to escape charges of an ill-advised perception of Judaism that he perceives as operating in much of the Christian tradition as anti-Semitic.

The Documentary or Markan Hypothesis and Q as an Operating Synoptic Approach

As with the other searches, the third search also takes the Documentary Hypothesis and its Markan priority as its operating synoptic assumption. This hypothesis has been labeled as one of the assured results of nineteenth-century criticism.¹⁷⁵ The criterion in all three searches are heavily weighted for their operational procedure (e.g. multiple attestation in Mark, Q and M, L) to affirm tradition as “authentic.”¹⁷⁶ Increasing doubts about the 2DH and 4DH at the end of the twentieth century suggest that the criteria revolving around this hypothesis are dubious at best. If this 2DH/4DH synoptic hypothesis is wrong, then working within its confines proves absolutely nothing about historicity.

Form and Redaction Criticism as Operating Assumptions

As with the other two searches, a large number of the third questers presume a distortion or bias in the early church as well as with the gospel writers. Simply put, a strategic layering between what Jesus actually said and did is often *a priori* assumed in both form (reflects theology of the church) and redaction (reflects theology of the evangelist). The question of if and how much of Jesus’ theology can be derived from the gospels is always a problem for the three quests and the non-quest period, for large portions of the gospels are seen as products of the church or some unknown evangelist who composed the gospels with their own distinctive biases.

The Trojan Horse of the Third Search: Jesus within the Confines of Judaism

The emphasis of the Third Search on placing Jesus within the confines of Judaism is not only tenuous, but *complete nonsense*. It is actually a Trojan horse that destroys the canonical gospels portrait of how Jesus really was in history as He walked the confines of Palestine in His day. The canonical gospel, as well as other portions of the New Testament, presents Jesus consistently as walking in complete conformity, *NOT with the corrupt Judaism of His day*, but *with the OT Law*. In His birth He was circumcised on the eighth day as the Mosaic Law prescribed (Luke 2:21–24 cp. Lev 12:1–8); He told the Jews that He did not come to abolish the Old

¹⁷⁵ Since the 2DH and 4DH obtained dominance during the first search for the “historical Jesus,” this approach predominates in all three searches. See William R. Farmer, “A ‘Skeleton in the Closet’ of Gospel Research,” in *Biblical Research*, Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, (Chicago: SBR, 1961), 18–43.

¹⁷⁶ For an excellent discussion of the criteria in the first two searches, see William O. Walker, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Discussion of Methodology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 1969 51, No. 1 (January 1969), 38–56; Harvey K. McArthur, “Basic Issues: A Survey of Recent Gospel Research,” *Interpretation* XVIII (1964), 39–55.

Testament but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17–19). Paul reminds Christians in Gal 4:4 that “when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” Jesus told the Jews of His day to search the OT Scriptures in John 5:39–40: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” After His physical resurrection, in Luke 24:13, He told the disciples on the road to Emmaus how the OT Scriptures testified to Him: “And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” The gospels portray Him in complete conformity to the Old Testament. Jesus loved His Jewish people, especially the common Jew (Matt 9:36–38; Mark 6:34; Luke 2:29–30; 14:14). The cleansing of the temple in all four gospels drives home the fact that Jesus perceived the Judaism of His day as corrupt (Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–47; John 2:13–16).¹⁷⁷ As a result, to place Jesus within the confines of the Judaism of His day is to destroy the true Jesus in history and create a false Jesus who, once again, appeals to the predilections and whims of many of today’s scholars.

Conclusion

Three searches for the “historical Jesus” are really one overarching endeavor. What makes the Third Search qualitatively different is that evangelicals are now finding virtue in participating in it, while having rejected the first two searches. The second part will cover evangelical participation in this third search. This searching is rapidly becoming a “watershed” issue. Evangelical, Darrell Bock, who diligently searches for the “‘historical’ Jesus,” attributes disagreement with his searching as due to evangelical ignorance: “this book [*Key Events*] will likely not be understood by some. What we have done is to play by the rules of Historical Jesus study and made the case for 12 key events in Jesus’ life in the process.”¹⁷⁸ To him (and perhaps other evangelicals who participate in it), any other approach than the historical searching that they are involved in is not “serious historical engagement” in terms of the gospels.¹⁷⁹ Evangelical, Norman Geisler, counters such an assertion by noting the word *historical* “bristles” with hostile “philosophical presuppositions” whose “premises and procedures undermine the very divinely authoritative Scripture they confess.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ The present writer sees the depth of corruption in Judaism in the fact that Jesus had to cleanse the temple twice: Once in the beginning of His ministry (John) and another time at the end (synoptics).

¹⁷⁸ http://blogs.bible.org/bock/darrell_l._bock/key_events_in_the_life_of_the_historical_jesus_recognition_and_other_thoughts http://blogs.bible.org/bock/darrell_l._bock/key_events_in_the_life_of_the_historical_jesus_recognition_and_other_thoughts (accessed 11/5/2011).

¹⁷⁹ Darrell Bock, “Faith and the Historical Jesus: Does A Confessional Position and Respect for the Jesus Tradition Preclude Serious Historical Engagement?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9 (2011): 3–25.

¹⁸⁰ Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, “Darrell Bock and Robert Webb on Inerrancy,” in *Defending Inerrancy, Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011): 193–211, quotes from pp. 209, 210. See also, F. David Farnell, “Searching for the

A decisive question remains—Would any true skeptics of the Jesus tradition accept or be persuaded by any positive conclusions (“key events”) of these evangelical searchers who, while using post-modernistic historiography and the ideology of historical criticism, attempt to impose *a priori* evangelical prepositions on the Gospels, i.e. assuming what they are trying to prove? Or, is it more likely that these evangelicals will further erode the gospels trustworthiness by surrendering the gospels to such replete skepticism?