

## HISTORY AND THEOLOGY IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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It is a supreme irony that a century ago Albert Schweitzer summed up the nineteenth century quests for the historical Jesus by showing that they had all painted a Jesus in their own image. He called for a new openness to history, to let "Jesus be Jesus." In his inimitable prose he said,

Formerly it was possible to book through-tickets at the supplementary-psychological knowledge office, which enabled those traveling in the interests of life-of-Jesus constructions to use express trains, thus avoiding the inconvenience of having to stop at every little station, change, and run the risk of missing their connection. This ticket office is now closed. There is a station at the end of each section of the narrative, and the connections are not guaranteed.<sup>1</sup>

The result was a new age of historical inquiry designed to discover the true "historical Jesus." Fueled by the historical skepticism of Wrede and Troeltsch,<sup>2</sup> the new era sought to determine "the real Jesus" of history. The results have been disappointing to say the least. The new Jesuses have suspiciously resembled the old in the sense that the so-called pure historians have also "modernized"<sup>3</sup> him and created a list of figures that would fit their own times quite well. A brief perusal of the pictures developed in recent decades will illustrate this: the existentialist Jesus of Käsemann and Bornkamm; the itinerant cynic philosopher of Funk and Crossan; the Spirit-filled

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<sup>1</sup>A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: n.p., 1910), 333.

<sup>2</sup>W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (London: James Clarke, 1971 [1901]); E. Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History* (trans. J. L. Adams; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, [1898]), 11-32, summed up the historiography of the enlightenment with his three principles: 1) historical judgments are uncertain and must be subjected to critical scrutiny; 2) events in the past can only be accepted if they are analogous to current experience; and 3) past events must be correlated to present events before they can be affirmed.

<sup>3</sup>The title of a well-known work by H. J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1937).

teacher of wisdom of Borg; the revolutionary social activist of Horsley; the prophet of Sophia of Fiorenza—all depict a Jesus who would find a perfect niche in the modern world more than one that fits the actual biblical and historical portrait. We have come full circle back to Schweitzer, proof that the so-called scientific advance promised in critical circles has not been forthcoming. The thesis of this paper is that no historical or “real” Jesus is possible until we take the data of the gospels seriously as historical documents in their own right.

At the same time, evangelical scholars must answer charges that we as well have failed to solve the problem. Luke Timothy Johnson has challenged the “cultural agenda” behind evangelical scholarship, saying,

A . . . complex pattern of avoidance can be found among those professors of New Testament in conservative seminaries who have managed to combine “critical scholarship” with the demands of traditional authority. A careful reading of their publications reveals that the scholarship is “critical” in form much more than in substance; the paraphernalia of the academy are used—often with considerable cleverness—to support conclusions already determined by doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

His criticism is that we are encumbered by an a priori demand that the Bible be accepted as an inerrant, absolutely historical document in its own right. Therefore, he believes, we cannot allow historical inquiry to proceed freely so as to let the results flow from the data itself. In one sense he has a point; we do believe that the gospels are inerrant and therefore perfectly reliable history. However, he is wrong that this leads us to “conclusions already determined by doctrine.” Inerrancy is not a purely deductive conclusion imposed on the data; it is more an inductive principle developed through the data. The well-known “burden of proof” principle utilizes this—the burden is more upon the skeptic to disprove the data rather than upon the positive historian to prove it; as in jurisprudence the claims of the data are assumed until proven otherwise.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical scholars work with the full range of historical documents in order to see the historical Jesus as he emerges from the biblical documents as informed and clarified by extra-biblical material. Johnson himself argues for a more text-aware approach to the historical Jesus, though he personally believes historical Jesus research is unnecessary.<sup>6</sup> Evangelical historians more than any other fulfill this demand for a text-centered study of

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<sup>4</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest For the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 65.

<sup>5</sup>See S. C. Goetz and C. L. Blomberg, “The Burden of Proof,” *JSNT* 11 (1981): 39-63.

<sup>6</sup>See the interesting response to this by J. D. Crossan, “Why Christians Must Search for the Historical Jesus,” *BRev* 12 (1996): 42-45.

history.<sup>7</sup> It is amazing that many critical scholars accept nearly everything said by Josephus or Tacitus but doubt everything said in the gospels. The new approach to the historical Jesus, that of the third quest, is more open to the gospel data. Therefore, evangelicals have the best tools for uncovering this material, for we take those texts more seriously than others.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the interaction between history and theology that is a major factor in any attempt to discover the historical Jesus that lies behind the documents themselves. We all agree that each gospel is a portrait of Jesus, an individual glimpse of not only Jesus as he was but of the church's understanding of his significance. In other words, the gospels are exactly what the term implies—good news or sermons about Jesus, theologized history rather than “pure” history, as if there is such a thing as pure history. Pure history is the event as it occurs; but once that event is recorded, it is always interpreted in terms of its significance. That is as true of Collingsworth and Gibbons as it is of Matthew and Mark. This is what the evangelists have done, telling the story of Jesus interpreted in terms of its theological relevance. As we seek to go behind the gospel pictures, we are asking the same questions as any historian—how much did Jesus understand of his nature and how did that understanding develop? How did his life on earth unfold, and what was the interaction between the various groups as they reacted to Jesus? In so doing, there will be two parts to this paper, first a historical survey of the issue as it unfolded over the last hundred years leading up to the current scene, and second a delineation of principles for interacting with both history and theology in the pursuit of the historical Jesus.

### *I. HISTORY OF THE DEBATE*

I will delineate three stages in the debate, detailing the movements of the issue. The first stage is “history or theology,” in which critical scholars established an absolute dichotomy between the brute facts of history and the theological interpretation of the significance of events. Only the former can be accepted as historical. The second stage I will label “history and theology,” as scholars more and more came to realize that there is still history behind the interpretations. The final stage I am calling “history through theology,” as scholars have begun to understand that all history is interpreted, and therefore theological reflection is the medium through which history has come to us.

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<sup>7</sup>See the excellent article by E. E. Ellis, “Reading the Gospels as History,” *CTR* 3 (1988): 3-15, arguing that a proper use of presuppositions and historiographical techniques affirm the historical veracity of the gospels.

*A. History or Theology (1900-1970)*

Following the enlightenment principle of truth through reason alone, it was thought that history cannot be determined until theology has been removed. Here we must begin with Martin Kähler's distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic biblical Christ.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Kähler was trying to protect church dogma from the skeptics, but his premise assumed a radical dichotomy between history and theology in the pursuit of truth. It became an accepted axiom that whatever was written down in the gospels for a theological purpose has no value for historical pursuits. This line of pursuit culminated in Bultmann, who not only tried to remove the supernatural underpinning of the NT as "myth" but made Jesus nothing more than the presupposition of NT theology.<sup>9</sup> For him the gospel accounts were the product of the faith of the early church, and so in them we have almost nothing of the historical Jesus. In fact, Bultmann bristled at any possibility of constructing a historical portrait of Jesus, for the gospels dealt only with theology. For him the Christ of faith was the product of the church, not vice versa. This was transmitted to the English-speaking world by R. H. Lightfoot, who argued that the gospels are more theology than history, concluding that "they yield little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways."<sup>10</sup> This was due to a kind of Barthian emphasis on faith over history. It was believed that to base faith in Christ on a historical quest for the authentic Jesus would be to destroy the very basis of that faith. So these scholars carefully avoided any such historical enterprise.

We all know the basic tenet of form criticism, that the sayings and stories of Jesus floated independently during the oral period of the church and were altered progressively on the basis of the kerygmatic needs of the church. This led to the most radical of the criteria for disseminating history in the gospel accounts, the dissimilarity principle. Of all the criteria for authenticity, this most thoroughly exemplifies the radical skepticism of rationalist historiography, for it assumes that any contact whatsoever between the Jesus tradition and either Israel or the early church makes a historical tradition unlikely. This obviously addresses the theology-history distinction, since it is based upon the belief that any influence of Jewish thinking or of later Christian belief on the Jesus tradition means that the historical record is tainted. Once more, theology by definition is assumed to be ahistorical. In actuality few scholars have bought into so radical a dichotomy, and as we will see, the

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<sup>8</sup>Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (trans. C. E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964 [1896]).

<sup>9</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. K. Grobel; New York: Scribner's, 1951), 1:3.

<sup>10</sup>R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934), 225.

movement in recent years has been away from this rigid skepticism. Few doubt that there was an oral period before the gospels were written, but was this period characterized by wholesale creation of sayings and stories? The tradition behind the collection of Jesus' sayings is the Jewish *halākāh*, in which the sayings of the wise were passed on with great emphasis on verbal accuracy.<sup>11</sup> There is no real evidence for created sayings. Moreover, on what account, it must be asked, is theology ahistorical? All history writing is interpretive, and it has always been possible to separate an event from its interpretation. The fact of theological reflection does not turn an account into creative midrash or fiction. It simply shows the author's understanding of the meaning of the event. For instance, when Bush called the Sept. 11 tragedy the act of a cowardly madman, this did not make the destruction of the World Trade Center a non-event; it simply told what Bush felt about the perpetrators. More on this later.

This bias continued in the movement from form to redaction criticism, for the only actual difference was that for redaction critics the theological additions were made by the evangelists rather than the early church. Conzelmann, for instance, believed that Luke rewrote the Jesus story for salvation-historical reasons, to explain the delay of the Parousia. To be sure, the gospels were now seen as whole compositions rather than the scissors-and-paste compilations of the form critics. But the bifurcation of history and theology continued unabated. All theological sections were assumed to have little or no basis in history, but rather were the creative additions of the evangelists. The separation of *Historie* from *Geschichte*, of so-called "pure facts" from theological reflection, was the norm of the day. For them, the early church, and the evangelists in particular, were far more interested in theology than in history and so created sayings and stories to meet the needs of the later church. This does not mean there was no interest in the historical Jesus. The "new quest" began about the same time as redaction criticism with Käsemann's famous 1953 address in the Marburg colloquy, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus."<sup>12</sup> Bultmann's negative bias against studying the historical Jesus was overturned in one fell swoop. However, the negative criteria were still in control, and large amounts of gospel material were relegated to the dust bin of later theological developments. As Bornkamm said in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, the task is to recover "those facts that are prior to any pious interpretation and which manifest themselves as undisturbed and primary."<sup>13</sup>

A word must be said here about the Jesus Seminar. While Funk and Crossan began their ill-begotten quest twenty years after the

<sup>11</sup>See S. Neill and T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (2d edition; New York: Oxford, 1988), 260.

<sup>12</sup>E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1964), 15-47.

<sup>13</sup>G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 26.

new quest, their historiography was a throw-back to the post-Bultmannian days, understandable in light of the fact that Funk studied under Bultmann. Their negative criteria seemed to skip the intervening movements of the 1970s and early 1980s and returned to the halcyon days of radical skepticism in the 1960s. This is why they have been so universally rejected even by critical scholars. Their entire program is anachronistic and fails to take into consideration the more positive approaches of scholars today.

*B. History and Theology (1970-1985)*

It has long been realized that the gospels, apart from the story of Jesus himself, have been remarkably true to the world of the first century. As background studies have exploded in the last fifty years, the faithfulness of the gospel writers to their own times has been even more upheld.<sup>14</sup> This has tremendous significance for the general trustworthiness of the gospel accounts. Theissen and Merz in their excellent volume *The Historical Jesus* have summarized and evaluated "thirteen objections by historical skeptics to the historical evaluation of the Jesus tradition."<sup>15</sup>

1. The silence of non-Christian sources about Jesus is correct but not that different from silence regarding others in the first century like Paul or Hillel or Bar Cochba.
2. The mythical portrait of Jesus in the writings of Paul (in which his earthly life seems only an intermediate stage between pre-existence and exaltation), does not mean there was no synoptic tradition in his day. Paul centered on the cross and resurrection, historical events from his earthly life, and this does not mean he knew nothing of his earthly life. A good parallel exists between the gospel of John and his epistles, which also say little about the earthly Jesus even though the letters presuppose the gospel.
3. The contradictions between the Johannine picture of Jesus and that in the Synoptics do mean for Theissen and Merz that it is less trustworthy, although they recognize historical information in the narrative sections.
4. The belief that Easter faith has reshaped pre-Easter traditions is now seen as reductionistic. In reality the movement has been both ways, and the two are inseparable. There is too much material in the Jesus story that clearly fits the pre-Easter situation to make

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<sup>14</sup>For an excellent study of the place of local color and geographical details in historical Jesus studies, see G. Theissen, "Lokalkoloritforschung in den Evangelien. Plädoyer für die Erneuerung einer alten Fragestellung," *EvT* 45 (1985): 481-99.

<sup>15</sup>G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 91-121.

this view viable. In fact, John himself says clearly when something was not understood until after Easter (2:22; 12:16).

5. The fact that the Synoptic accounts were written down many years after the events does not make them necessarily suspect, for as already stated the "local color" is remarkably faithful to the times of Jesus and shows "indications of familiarity" with the original events.
6. The belief of Dibelius and others that the Jesus tradition spoke only to the needs of the later church rather than to the situation of the historical Jesus has also been challenged because the gospels contain "historicizing elements" that mark the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* rather than the later situation. Both historical figures and sayings fit the time of Jesus and not just the later time of the church.
7. Similarly, it has often been said that the gospels were the product of community needs rather than historical interests. Yet so many of the later issues are not found in the gospels, like circumcision or structures of authority. Instead, as Theissen says, we have a picture in the Synoptics of a "primitive Christian charismatic" movement that provides a historical bridge to the later community.
8. Many think that the productive power of proof from Scripture led the later church to create stories that fit OT themes. Yet much of this fulfillment probably goes back to the historical Jesus himself, and the evidence demonstrates that the early church used such proof-texts to give meaning to existing events rather than to create new events (though Theissen and Merz believe it may have had productive power in Matthew's infancy narratives).
9. Since the sayings circulated in small units, it has been held to be impossible to distinguish between authentic and secondary traditions. However, scholars now believe that we can know the "form" of the Jesus tradition with a high degree of probability, e.g., his use of admonitions, beatitudes, and parables. The old skepticism is no longer tenable.<sup>16</sup>
10. The infiltration of the sayings tradition by primitive Christian prophecies was overstated and unnecessary. It has never been more than a critical abstraction.
11. The presence of the miraculous and of supernatural intervention is not a later mythical accretion. More and

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<sup>16</sup>On the dangers of the old skepticism, see A. K. M. Adam, "Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Why Historical Criticism Can't Protect Christological Orthodoxy," *SJT* 49 (1996): 391-410.

more it is realized that the miracle stories would not have developed had not Jesus performed such extraordinary events. The criterion of multiple attestation favors the authenticity of the miracle tradition. They occur in all the strata of the traditions as well as in both narrative and sayings material.<sup>17</sup>

12. The framework of the Jesus tradition, it has often been said, has been transformed via "mythical motifs" (virgin birth, temptation, transfiguration, resurrection). Yet such elements are found in many ancient stories like that of Alexander or Augustus and do not point to ahistorical provenance. Non-evangelical scholars are more and more open to historical background in these stories, though certainly they differ widely in terms of what they accept. Still, they remain open to history behind the theology.
13. The criteria of authenticity are more and more being criticized for their skeptical nature and are being replaced with positive criteria centering on historical plausibility,<sup>18</sup> looking for what will best explain the historical setting of Jesus in the first century Jewish context. There is now a new openness to the Jesus traditions in their ancient context.

Factors such as these led to a counter-movement in the 1970s away from the skepticism of the Bultmann school and toward a recognition of historical content.<sup>19</sup> Two major sets of publications paved the way to a reappraisal of the data. First came the books arguing for the interdependence of history and theology in the gospels. I. Howard Marshall wrote his *Luke: Historian and Theologian* in 1970 and launched the movement in effect. He argued that Luke "was a historian who wished to give a faithful portrait of the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early church." So his product was not imaginative but was rather "very much controlled by his sources."<sup>20</sup> In other words, Luke was combining history and theology to produce a message for his church that flowed out of the historical events themselves. Marshall argued that Luke as a

<sup>17</sup>See also C. A. Evans, "Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology," *TS* 54 (1993): 3-36, for an excellent presentation of the demise of the mythical approach and R. Schmücker, "Zur Funktion der Wundergeschichten im Markusevangelium," *ZNW* 84 (1993): 1-26, who argues that the miracle tradition is so integral to the Jesus story that it must be pre-Markan and pre-Easter.

<sup>18</sup>On the validity of the plausibility criterion, see A. Puig i Tarresch, "La Recherche du Jésus historique," *Bib* 81 (2000): 189-94, who argues that this will help break down the barrier between history and faith, between the criteria for historicity and the sources used by the evangelists.

<sup>19</sup>For a survey of this, see M. Green, "Jesus and Historical Skepticism," in *Truth and God Incarnate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 107-39.

<sup>20</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 9.

historian was interested only in real events (those that actually occurred) but chose those which he considered significant for his readers and then reconstructed them to provide a message. In this sense a historian seeks to be accurate but by necessity must be involved with the events he is relating.<sup>21</sup> In an excellent discussion, Marshall shows that biblical faith is rooted in the historical and cannot be separated from it. Historical proof confirms the factual aspect of belief in the sense that trust and commitment are based on knowledge. The evangelists were anchoring their faith in the events of Jesus' life, and so "the contemporary believer must go back to history."<sup>22</sup> In short, Luke was a historian who wrote a theological gospel.

Ralph Martin built upon this in 1972 with his *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian*, where he argues that Mark is primarily a theologian who sought to present "the living Lord as the Christians' contemporary in his own day" but who was also a historian who tried to "establish a continuity of this figure with the Jesus who shared our life in Galilee and Jerusalem."<sup>23</sup> Mark is not interested in the Galilean Jesus as a "purely" historical figure but in the relevance of that Jesus as Lord of all. The gospels are not "lives of famous men" or "memoirs" but in the words of Mark are "gospels" (1:11, 15), a new type of literary genre that has as its purpose the call of the reader to salvation in Jesus. This good news "took historical shape in Jesus of Nazareth" and was seen in "the theologically interpreted historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah of Israel and Son of God."<sup>24</sup> Once again, history is combined with theology to produce Mark's gospel.

The third book in the series was produced in 1989 by R. T. France, *Matthew – Evangelist and Teacher*. Writing much later to complete the series (Smalley's study on John came out in 1978), he does not center as much on the issue of history and theology, presupposing the results of the others. Producing his work in an entirely different critical climate, it is significant that France did not feel the need to defend his approach on the basic historical trustworthiness of Matthew.

The second set of works that defines this period is the six-volume gospel perspective series, published from 1980-1986 and culminating in Craig Blomberg's *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (1987), which effectively summed up the findings of the scholars. The purpose of this series was to explore and defend the historical veracity of the gospels against the negative conclusions of radical critics. As France and Wenham say in the preface to the first volume,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 21-25.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 32-37.

<sup>23</sup>Ralph Martin, *Mark – Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), 15. For a similar conclusion, see W. L. Lane, "From Historian to Theologian: Milestones in Markan Scholarship," *RevExp* 75 (1978): 601-17.

<sup>24</sup>Martin, *Mark*, 17-28.

“the question of the historical value of the gospels cannot be dismissed and should not be left unanswered.”<sup>25</sup> A major issue in the various articles is the possibility that the evangelists added stories and sayings to the Jesus tradition. By comparing the gospel traditions with the Jewish midrashic expansions, Bauckham considers it likely that the “Evangelist’s traditions, however ‘midrashic’ his procedure may be, could be historical in origin.”<sup>26</sup> In the same volume, France argues that there is no evidence in the gospels of a tendency to “create history out of Scripture,” concluding that “to observe a process of theological interpretation is not at all the same as to postulate the development of new elements of narrative.”<sup>27</sup> In short, the gospels do not demonstrate the kind of creative midrash often assumed to be the case. Thus Blomberg concludes that “the trustworthiness of the gospels represents a verdict which careful historical analysis can yield.”<sup>28</sup>

### *C. History Through Theology (1985 to the Present)*

At the second stage theology was seen as a partner with history since history is always interpreted history. At this third stage theology becomes a path to history, not just a partner but an essential aspect of all historical inquiry into the life of Jesus. The “third quest for the historical Jesus” was a radical departure from the first two in terms of being open to the gospel data as a historical record in its own right and utilizing Jewish background alongside Hellenistic.<sup>29</sup> There were three precursors to the movement. The first was the Jewish lives of Jesus, produced by a distinguished group moving from Claude Montefiore, Israel Abrahams, and Joseph Klausner in the first half of the twentieth century to Samuel Sandmel, David Flusser, and Geza Vermes in the last half. Flusser and Vermes especially turned the attention of scholars to the Jewishness of Jesus, and this is one of the major characteristics of the third quest. Flusser argued that it is indeed possible to write a life of Jesus but only from a Jewish perspective. Vermes’s *Jesus the Jew* (1973) believed that Jesus was a charismatic Jewish holy man.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup>R. T. France and D. Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 1:5.

<sup>26</sup>Richard Bauckham, “The Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum of Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as ‘Midrash,’” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 3:67.

<sup>27</sup>R. T. France, “Postscript—Where Have We Got To, and Where Do We Go From Here?” in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. France and Wenham), 3:297, 298.

<sup>28</sup>C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 256.

<sup>29</sup>For an excellent portrayal of the movement back to the centrality of Jewish background from one of the pioneers, see W. D. Davies, “My Odyssey in New Testament Interpretation,” *BRev* 5 (1989): 10-18.

<sup>30</sup>For a good discussion, see D. A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of the Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

The second precursor was Ben Meyer, whose *The Aims of Jesus* (1979) led to a reappraisal of historical inquiry. He argued that "intending subjects charge history with meaning," and therefore the historian must interpret and explain not just the events but the aims of the people who perform those events.<sup>31</sup> In short, both the event and the significance/theological relevance of the event are part of the historian's task. Moreover, for Meyer it is a positive endeavor, for part of the task is to gain control over the data, including that data from the gospels themselves perceived as viable historical material. Meyer believed that the "methodical skepticism" of the old approaches must be reversed, for it is arbitrary and counter-productive, leading to "the global supposition that the Gospel accounts are historical."<sup>32</sup> Meyer certainly did not mean by this what some would, for he was simply saying they must be treated as possible sources of historical veracity. Nevertheless, this was a huge step forward on the issue. Thus Meyer's approach was to study what Jesus did and ascertain from those actions what his aims and purposes were. What was revolutionary was that Meyer centered not on the sayings but on the deeds.<sup>33</sup>

The third precursor was A. E. Harvey whose *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (1982) was another step forward. He believed that the historical Jesus was not only a viable option but could be identified by seeing his actions highlighted against the historical constraints of his time. What Harvey meant by this was that Jesus acted within his times and interacted with the historical figures and forces of his day.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, he is a legitimate object of normal historiographical study as a man of his times. In one sense this is not so much more than Schweitzer said, but it is actually much more, for Harvey meant that Jesus can be seen in the widest possible convergence of historical forces. There is no narrowing of Jesus to Jewish apocalyptic movements but rather a full-fledged examination of his life as presented in the gospels in light of his impact upon his times.

It is not our purpose here to survey the various lives of Jesus that have resulted from the third quest,<sup>35</sup> though the list of contributors is a veritable who's who in Jesus studies—E. P. Sanders, Gerd Theissen, Marcus Borg, Richard Horsley, Raymond E. Brown, Markus Bockmuehl, John P. Meier, Ben Witherington, N. T. Wright,

<sup>31</sup>Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 78. For a similar approach, see R. G. Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

<sup>32</sup>Meyer, *Aims*, 81-83.

<sup>33</sup>On this see also F. G. Downing, "Words as Deeds and Deeds as Words," *BibInt* 3 (1995): 129-43.

<sup>34</sup>A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 6-7.

<sup>35</sup>For a good survey, see B. Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995).

and Scot McKnight. The tone has radically changed in the last two decades. Rather, our purpose is to survey the developing historiography of this school to ascertain the current climate in historical Jesus research as well as the current thinking regarding the interaction of history and theology in the task.<sup>36</sup> Due to the limitations of this paper, I will center on perhaps the three most influential – E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, and N. T. Wright.

Sanders finds the negative criteria inadequate and believes that the historical Jesus will emerge when placed within the context of the Judaism within which he spent his life. Moreover, the accounts in the gospels should not be taken as automatically suspect.

We should trust this information unless we have good reason not to do so, that is, unless the stories in the gospels contain so many anachronisms and anomalies that we come to regard them as fraudulent.<sup>37</sup>

Sanders stands between the two schools, basically skeptical but open to the data with two foci – the data should situate Jesus firmly within Judaism and should explain why his movement eventually broke with Judaism.<sup>38</sup> His starting point is what he believes are certain “facts” about Jesus’ life – his baptism by John, that he was a Galilean preacher and healer, that he called twelve disciples, that he confined himself to Israel, that he engaged in controversy over the temple, that he was crucified by the Romans, that his followers continued the movement afterward, and that the Jews opposed and persecuted the new movement.<sup>39</sup> This list grew in his later book to include such things as his preaching of the kingdom, the Last Supper, and the fact that his disciples “saw” him after his death in some sense.<sup>40</sup> From this basic list Sanders then examines other events and teachings in the gospels to ascertain their fit in explaining the Jesus phenomenon in the first century. Still, he rejects a great deal, for instance Jesus’ preaching of repentance on the grounds that there is no firm tradition for a call to national repentance.<sup>41</sup> Against this Chilton has validly pointed out that there is simply too much and too varied an amount of material for just such a call, and it also coheres well with the prophetic tradition of which Jesus was a part.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>We do not mean that this is a consensus movement. Certainly the Jesus Seminar is in radical disagreement with the “New Quest.” For another skeptical appraisal, see H. Koester, “Redirecting the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” *HTR* 23 (1993): 9-11, who believes the historical Jesus is still beyond the purview of the historian.

<sup>37</sup>E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 54.

<sup>38</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 18.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>40</sup>See the discussion in Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 119-20.

<sup>41</sup>Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 106-13.

<sup>42</sup>B. D. Chilton, “Jesus and the Repentance of E. P. Sanders,” *TynBul* 39 (1988): 11-18.

John P. Meier is even more open to the historical data in the gospels but at the same time wants to be absolutely objective. His well-known metaphor is an imaginary “unpapal enclave” of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and agnostic scholars who are locked up in a basement room of the Harvard Divinity School library and not let out until they “have hammered out a consensus document on who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he intended in his own time and place.”<sup>43</sup> On nearly every issue he asks what this fictitious group would do with the evidence. In so doing he draws a contrast between the “real Jesus” (which cannot be recovered) and the “historical Jesus” that can be known via modern scientific research. At the same time, he admits that true neutrality is not really possible and that all one can do is bracket their worldview and presuppositions.<sup>44</sup>

In achieving this, then, method is everything, and Meier begins with the sources, arguing strongly that the primary sources are the gospels themselves, including John. He does accept the three stages of development (material from Jesus, from the early church, and from the evangelists themselves),<sup>45</sup> and in delineating how to make such decisions he centers on five basic criteria for authenticity—embarrassment (sayings or events that would have created difficulty for the early church like Jesus being baptized by John or Jesus’ ignorance of the time of the End [Mark 13:32]); discontinuity (those aspects that could not be derived from Judaism or the early church like his rejection of voluntary fasting or his prohibition of divorce); multiple attestation (material attested in more than one literary source [Mark, Q, M, L, Paul, John] or form [parable, pronouncement, dispute, story, etc.] like Jesus’ kingdom preaching or the words of institution at the Last Supper); coherence (material consistent with historical evidence proven by the other criteria like sayings regarding the coming of the kingdom or Jesus’ legal disputes with adversaries); and the criterion of rejection and execution (deciding what events and words explain why Jesus threatened the establishment so much that he came to a violent end). He also accepts secondary supportive criteria (traces of Aramaic, Palestinian environment, vividness of narration, tendencies of the developing Synoptic tradition, and historical presumption) as helpful but not conclusive.<sup>46</sup> In using these, however, he is generally positive regarding results. For instance, on miracles he states that while historical enquiry cannot state with certainty that a miracle happened, it can affirm that Jesus performed extraordinary deeds that those around him interpreted as miracles.

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<sup>43</sup>J. P. Meier, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-6.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 168-84.

At times, however, Meier is too cautious and accepts the older separation of history from theology.<sup>47</sup> For instance, he says that the resurrection of Jesus is not open to historical enquiry. Here Witherington (another new quester) takes exception, arguing that every aspect of Jesus' life is open to historical enquiry, including theological material. When Jesus himself made theological claims (e.g., regarding his resurrection), they are open to historical verification.

In other words, the quest for the historical Jesus, while primarily the quest for the human face of Jesus, may also involve evaluating whether or not he made certain theological claims about his words, deeds, and person. History and theology in such a case cannot be neatly separated.<sup>48</sup>

Tom Wright has made the most detailed study of methodology and criteria for historical Jesus research. He believes the gospels were indeed ancient biographies describing the life of the historical Jesus, and for the most part they were reliable documents. The major criterion he utilizes is his "double criterion of similarity and dissimilarity," by which he means that something that is doubly credible within first century Judaism and equally credible as a "starting point" for later Christian reflection and belief goes back to the historical Jesus.<sup>49</sup> The positive use of this criterion is very refreshing.

Most importantly for this paper, it is Wright who has brought theology fully back into the discussion of the historical Jesus. Wright proceeds from the perspective of "critical realism," that is the expectation that there is something "real" there in the biblical material but which needs a "critical examination" to find out what is actually there. This occurs in three stages: a hypothesis that is then studied by critical reflection to see if the theory "can survive the challenge and speak truly of reality."<sup>50</sup> In this framework the theological reflection of the NT writers is part of the historical record and a means to historical reflection. For instance, he asks how Jesus came to be worshiped in a Jewish, adamantly monotheistic community.<sup>51</sup> He believes that such questions take us back to the earliest period. His point is that such aspects as his universal lordship, deity, and death "for us" are theological beliefs that must be explained historically rather than dismissed outright. This is a huge step forward in historical Jesus studies. The means by which

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<sup>47</sup>For instance, he believes the linking of the Herodians with the Pharisees (Mark 3:6; 12:13) is due to Markan redaction rather than historical tradition; cf. his "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians," *JBL* 119 (2000): 740-46.

<sup>48</sup>Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 203.

<sup>49</sup>N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 5-6.

<sup>50</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 32-37.

<sup>51</sup>Wright, *Victory of God*, 612.

Wright does this is to take seriously the “worldview” of first century Judaism as a clue to the mindset of Jesus himself.<sup>52</sup> So like Ben Meyer and John Meier his goal is not just events and sayings but the intentions and aims of the historical Jesus.

## II. AN AGENDA FOR HISTORY AND THEOLOGY IN THE SYNOPTIC ACCOUNTS

As we have seen, an entirely new atmosphere for doing history in the light of the theology-driven narratives exists today. It is now realized that theology does not obviate history, and in fact that theology is a necessary part of all historical accounts in the gospels from the standpoint that all historians must of necessity interpret the history they are portraying. The diversity of conclusions on the part of those who form the third quest is well known. However, the one thing they have in common is a positive use of the gospel records as historical accounts in their own right and the centrality of Jewish over Hellenistic sources, since Jesus spent his entire life in the Jewish world. This in itself is a step forward, for it represents a shift from the centrality of the early church to the centrality of the historical Jesus in the gospels. It also represents a shift to the view that the theological reflections of the evangelists and the other NT writers are part of the historical record and not to be rejected out of hand. The *Sitz im Leben Jesu* and the *Sitz im Leben der Kirche* are not conflicting traditions but part of one and the same tradition, the transparency of the story of Jesus as impacting the life of the church.

Wright says it well, arguing that the first century Jews and Christians

understood more about the real nature of history, that is, about the complex interaction of “event” and “meaning,” than has been grasped by the ardent proponents of “scientific history” in comparatively recent times.<sup>53</sup>

He uses the imagery of the “outside” (the event itself) and the “inside” (the meaning of the event for the church) to describe the historical accounts. Theology then is the inner element of the story and describes the reflection of the historian on the significance of the original event. As such it is dependent on the worldview of the interpreter, namely the evangelist, as well as the worldview of the contemporary historian today.<sup>54</sup> Our task is to ascertain both the inner and the outer dimensions of the gospel narrative as historical studies, since both come from the first century situation. Then we must judge the appropriateness and the plausibility of both aspects, the event and its interpretation, to the original historical situation.

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<sup>52</sup>Wright, *People of God*, 38-44.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 122-39.

For instance, the temptation narrative of Matthew and Luke must be studied at two levels, the event of three temptations by Satan in the desert and the interpretation of that event as a spiritual battle in which Jesus proved himself to be "Son of God" by besting Satan in open combat. At both levels we must determine the adequacy of the textual data to describe what really happened and what it meant. The two aspects are interdependent and together determine the biblical record.

A good example of this intertwining of theology with history is Blomberg's article, "The Miracles as Parables" in *Gospel Perspectives* 6.<sup>55</sup> He argues first that the miracle stories parallel Jesus' parables both in function and in many specific details and second that these parallels have promise for a new approach to the basic historicity of the miracle stories. His approach is to "establish the earliest meaning(s) of the parable" and then to "ask if any barriers prohibit moving back to Jesus himself as the original performer of the events described when interpreted in light of these meanings."<sup>56</sup> In other words, theology is the key to history! One example will suffice: the stilling of the storm miracle from the triple tradition (Mark 4:35-41 = Matt 8:23-27 = Luke 8:22-25). After noting the differences between the accounts, Blomberg summarizes that discipleship and misunderstanding are the central thrust of the miracle in all three accounts. As such the miracle teaches that Jesus' power mirrors the sovereignty of Yahweh and calls the disciple to faith and understanding. Thus, Blomberg argues, it should be anchored in the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* because it coheres with that tradition.

One other example will prove helpful. In Theissen and Merz's *The Historical Jesus*, there is an excellent discussion of "The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Christology."<sup>57</sup> First they provide a helpful taxonomy of the five options—two community-oriented options (an exclusive use of titles or heightening titles used by the earthly Jesus) and three centering on the historical Jesus (implicit Christology in which a later title is based on his teaching; evoked Christology in which Jesus caused others to give him titles during his lifetime; and an explicit Christology in which the title came from Jesus himself). They argue that all of these occurred. His self-understanding of his special relationship with God led him to preface his remarks with "amen" as having received them from God and showed awareness of a special authority by forgiving sins as well as performing miracles. He saw himself as Messiah and his disciples as a messianic collective, and this led to his execution by the Romans. Theissen and Merz themselves are not willing to go

<sup>55</sup>C. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," in *Gospel Perspectives: The Miracles of Jesus* (ed. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 6:327-60. On this see also C. Brown, "Synoptic Miracle Stories: A Jewish Religious and Social Setting," *Forum* 2 (1986): 55-76; and B. L. Blackburn, "The Miracles of Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 352-94.

<sup>56</sup>Blomberg, "Miracles," 330.

<sup>57</sup>Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 512-63.

beyond “son of man” in terms of Jesus’ own self-understanding.<sup>58</sup> However, their methodology provides a strong basis for going further with a more text-driven study.

The methodology that we use is complex. First, the critical criteria are still helpful, so long as they are used positively rather than negatively.<sup>59</sup> Even the dissimilarity principle has some value in ascertaining the irreducible minimum of what goes back to the historical Jesus. However, due to its overly negative base, more and more scholars are replacing it with the criterion of historical plausibility. As Meier says, “instead of giving us an assured minimum about Jesus, [it] winds up giving us a caricature by divorcing Jesus from the Judaism that influenced him and from the Church that he influenced.”<sup>60</sup> The plausibility criterion looks for that which properly explains key facts about Jesus.<sup>61</sup> This is a major criterion for the basic veracity of the miracle stories, for nothing else can viably explain the reaction of the people of Israel to him. Their wonder and awe alone can explain why the leaders did not arrest Jesus much sooner.

Second, we must interact with the whole tradition, the theology as well as the history, for the theological reflection is part of the historical record and cannot be detached. Nor should it be detached. We can ascertain the historicity of the theological with the same criteria, e.g., multiple attestation. For instance, the wonder of the crowds just mentioned is found at every level of the tradition, as is the hatred of the leaders. Their identification of Jesus with not just prophetic but messianic fervor is very much in keeping with the times. It would have been far more remarkable had they not seen him as a possible messianic deliverer. Moreover, the work of Ben Meyer and Tom Wright has shown that this can also be applied to Jesus’ own self-consciousness. Let us take one of the most difficult aspects of the tradition— Jesus understanding his death as having atoning significance. There are two primary texts that point in that direction, Mark 10:45 and parallels (“give my life a ransom for many”), and Mark 14:24 and parallels (“my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many”). It is common for scholars to believe that these are later additions. However, on the basis of possible Semitisms as well as its understated place in the text here (if it was a church logion it would have been put in a more central place and given more prominence), it can be shown that these are probably

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 561-62.

<sup>59</sup>See Grant R. Osborne, “The Evangelical and *Traditionsgeschichte*,” *JETS* 21 (1978): 117-30; R. H. Stein, “The ‘Criteria’ for Authenticity,” in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. France and Wenham) 1:225-63; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 246-48.

<sup>60</sup>Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 172.

<sup>61</sup>See G. Theissen, “Historical Skepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research or My Attempt to Leap Across Lessing’s Yawning Gulf,” *SJT* 49 (1996): 147-76, where he uses the plausibility principle to overcome the morass of historical relativism that has plagued the academy.

authentic logia.<sup>62</sup> Thus these are historical reflections on the part of Jesus that he would die as a vicarious sacrifice “for many.”

Third, I would argue once more that redaction and narrative criticisms are the friend rather than the foe of historical verification. Redaction approaches help us to identify the editorial choices of the evangelists and see how they used the Jesus tradition they received in highlighting various aspects of what Jesus said and did. I would be of those who think Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain are the same sermon. Therefore, when Matthew said “blessed are the poor in spirit” and Luke “blessed are the poor,” they were highlighting the spiritual and the economic sides, respectively, of what Jesus originally said. Moreover, the major contribution of redaction criticism is in the theological realm, as it uncovers the theological message behind the choices. Narrative analysis helps greatly in harmonizing disparate accounts, for it discovers the narrative flow behind the organizational patterns.

In conclusion, we are living in a new exciting era for historical Jesus studies, one in which a consensus is emerging that the gospels are far more viable for historical research than has been thought for the last two centuries. Moreover, this is a time when the theological reflections of the evangelists are more and more seen as stemming from the historical understanding of Jesus himself. We evangelicals are in the best position to take advantage of this opportunity, for we more than anyone recognize the sacred nature of the texts themselves and center on them as reliable historical documents. It is more and more recognized by the universities that the graduates of our schools are best equipped to do serious study of the texts. May we increase our efforts to produce the next generation of scholars who will be able to go beyond what we have done.

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<sup>62</sup>See further S. H. T. Page, “The Authenticity of the Ransom Logion (Mark 10:45b),” in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. France and Wenham), 1:137-61; R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Defense for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 587-90; D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word, 1995), 579-80.