

Who Needs "The Historical Jesus"? An Essay-Review

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John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jews: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. N.Y., 1992: Doubleday. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. 484 pp. \$25.
John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco, 1992: Harper San Francisco. 507 pp. \$30.

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From the beginhings of the quest for the historical Jesus, before the middle of the last century, to the present day, intense historical study has addressed to the Gospels a secular agendum grounded in three premises. These have been [1] historical facts, unmediated by tradition, themselves bear theological consequence, the gift of the Reformation (show me as fact in the sources, e.g., Scripture); [2] historical facts must undergo a rigorous test of skepticism, the donation of the Enlightenment (how could a whale swallow Jonah, and what else did he have for lunch that day); and [3] historical facts cannot comprise supernatural events, the present of nineteenth century German historical learning (exactly how things were cannot include rising from the dead).

These premises set a standard of historicity that religious writings such as the Gospels cannot, and should not, attempt to meet. For, after all, all three dismiss what to the evangelists is critical: these things happened in the way the Church has preserved them (also) in the Gospels, tradition also being a valid source, to which evangelists appeal; these things really did happen as the narrative says (would the Gospels lie?); and Jesus Christ assuredly performed miracles in his lifetime and rose from the dead (ours is the story of the unique man, God among us). The quest for the historical Jesus commences with the denial of the facticity of the Gospels in favor of their (some-time, somewhere) historicity. So to begin with the quest of the historical Jesus, from the Life of Jesus movement in the middle of the

nineteenth century forward, theological issues were laid before the tribunal of secular history, and theologians thought to sort out historical facts to settle theological questions.

Advocates of such a theological enterprise conducted in accord with the rules of another, secular field of knowledge altogether set forth extravagant claims in behalf of their results, which (in the Reformation tradition) serve as a medium for the reform of the faith (as both Catholic scholars before us explicitly state, as we shall see). But, in point of fact, the historical objectivity and rationality to which those who go off in quest of the facts behind the faith lay claim even at the outset come under question. The reason is that while in historical studies it is rare for the nationality or religion of a scholar to find a legitimate place in the evaluation of results, in this field, whether a scholar is Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, or secular invariably plays a role. Anyone who speaks of a "Jewish physicist" is a curiosity; but even Meier, who, as we shall see, has given us the definitive account of the quest and a judicious picture of its results, starts by inventing a meeting of a Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular scholar, required to come up with a consensus on who Jesus really was—that is, the historical Jesus.

That simple datum of biblical studies calls into question the premise of objectivity and at the threshold of study invokes the very opposite: faith, conviction, commitment. Then why insist that there is a kind of knowledge about Jesus that not only conforms to the kind of knowledge we have about George Washington but also distinguishes between the epiphenomena of piety and the hard facts of faith: "who he really was" also means, who he really wasn't. I cannot point to another religion, besides Christianity, that has entertained in the intellectual centers of the faith a systematic exercise in learning commencing with unfaith; certainly not Islam, as Salomon Rushdie's awful fate has shown, and certainly not Judaism, where the issues of theological learning—Talmud study, Scripture study, for example—do not confuse secular history with the pattern of religious truth, or ask Moses to submit to the mordant wit of Voltaire.

Nor can anyone claim that out of the quest for the historical Jesus has come determinative truth, vastly enriching the intellectual resources of the faith. Clearly, we understand the Gospels differently from the way they were understood before the enterprise got underway in nineteenth century Evangelical Lutheran Germany. But whether or not we know Jesus better than we did before because we now know who he really was and what he really did—as distinct from what the faithful have known all along—remains open to doubt. For, as a matter of historical fact, the results of the quest have produced nothing short of chaos—along with the first rate scholarship that both Meier and Crossan, of whom more below, have given

us. As many as are the scholars who have written lives of Jesus, so many are the Jesuses whom we know now but did not know before the quest began. In general, a review of the upshot of the question for the historical Jesus yields the simple observation, which every history of the quest for the historical Jesus has yielded, and which Crossan's book has provoked even now, that each generation gets the Jesus that it wants; pretty much every scholar comes up with the historical Jesus that suits his taste and judgment.

Indeed, the Gospels scholar Luke Timothy Johnson concludes his reading of the books before us with the observation that, once more, we have a Jesus for our times: "Does not Crossan's picture of a peasant cynic preaching inclusiveness and equality fit perfectly the idealized ethos of the late twentieth-century academic? Is not both authors' hope for a historical foil to theology or faith still fundamentally a theological, rather than a historical project?"¹ Discouraged, some ask, "What is left to believe in Jesus after the scholars have done with him?"² And, invariably, the answer, as in the case at hand, proves less incisive than the question—and revealing of not precisely what the questioner had in mind at all. For the quest for the historical Jesus conventionally portrays the questioner, and Meier says so in so many words, even as Crossan shows that fact with surpassing eloquence (but little humility).

Yet the diversity of the results does not take place in the indictment of two hundred years of theological learning, not even the paucity. Rather, the character of the results does. People can make a great name for themselves by saying whatever they want to about "the historical Jesus," making the front page of the *New York Times* (if that is what they dish to manufacture for themselves) if what they say is sufficiently scandalous, and therefore newsworthy. Announce that Jesus was precisely what the Gospels say he was—and still is—and even in churches some will yawn. But tell the world he was a homosexual magician, as the late Morton Smith did, and your day is made: you get to offend and insult those you wish to provoke, and to call yourself a great scholar at the same time. In no other field of study, whether claiming historical objectivity or glorying in utter subjectivity (as in current literary criticism) can solecism pass for scholarship, and out-and-out psychosis win a hearing as a new fact.

Certainly, in what must now be declared the forgery of the century, the very integrity of the quest for the historical Jesus was

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Marginal Jewish Peasant," *Commonweal* April 24, 1992, 26.

2. The title of an article by Philip L. Culbertson (*JES* 28 [1991] 1-17). His question is better than his answer. He has "a Pharisaic context for the historical Jesus," but exactly what he means by "Pharisaic" he does not tell us, and he is alarmingly ignorant of nearly all of the scholarship on that subject done in the past twenty years.

breached. The very quest met its defining disgrace by Morton Smith, whose "historical" results—Jesus was "really" a homosexual magician—depended upon a selective believing in whatever Smith thought was historical.³ Even at the time, some of us told Smith to his face that he was an upside down fundamentalist, believing anything bad anybody said about Jesus, but nothing good. And no one who so rebuked him objected to the campaigns of character assassination that Smith spent his remaining years conducting; there is a moment at which, after all, truth does matter, even if, in respect to Jesus, some imagine that it does not. Still, in defense of the question as Smith conducted it, the charge that each "biographer" of Jesus produces a Jesus in his own image is wide of the mark, since no one ever accused Smith of being a magician.

But his quest for the historical Jesus surely produced a scandal, and not only the results. As a matter of fact, Smith's presentation of the evidence for his homosexual magician, a Clement fragment he supposedly turned up in a library in Sinai in 1958, ranks as one of the most slovenly presentations of an allegedly important document in recent memory; and, to understate matters, it left open the very plausible possibility of forgery. Smith himself was an expert on such matters, having devoted scholarly essays to great forgeries in antiquity. It is no surprise that, reviewing Smith's results, the great New Testament scholar, Quentin Quesnell ended his questioning of Smith's evidence with the simple colloquy: "is there a reasonable possibility of forgery? The answer, working only with the evidence Smith presents, seems to be clearly, yes."⁴

Now the spectacle of the quest for the historical Jesus was exposed for all to see. What controls of rationality, objectivity, strict rules of evidence, skepticism, and criticism protected the field as such from a brilliant forgery, such as Quesnell exposed? That a field of learning should produce so grotesque a result as Smith wished reputable scholars to adopt disheartened those with the common sense to distinguish skepticism from spite, objective learning from a personal vendetta of a lapsed clergyman. It is worth dwelling on Quesnell's rather cautious indictment, to realize how open to fraud the quest had left itself, and how little, at its moment of truth, people were prepared to do in the name of the integrity of their subject. For Quesnell stood nearly alone,

3. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, a popularization of his findings in his *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) and *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

4. "The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 48-67; note Smith's reply, *CBQ* 38 (1976) 196-99, and Quesnell, *CQR* 38 (1976) 200-203.

and to this day has yet to receive his due from those whose field he proposed to defend.

Quesnell pointed out that Smith presents photographs, but not the manuscript itself, and the photographs are unsatisfactory: "he made them himself . . . with a handheld camera." So, in fact, no one has ever seen the document but Smith himself. Smith claims that various experts said the text was genuine, but, Quesnell says, "Unfortunately. . . Smith does not include the text of the answers which the experts gave." Smith wants the primary test of authenticity to be the wording; Quesnell: "the primary test of authenticity is examination of the manuscript." That leads Quesnell to wonder whether someone might have forged the document. Now when the Dead Sea scrolls came to light, entire academic careers were devoted to precisely the issues of validation of the manuscript itself: the ink, the medium of writing, orthography, a variety of types of physical evidence. Solomon Zeitlin, now forgotten but then a mighty figure, called into question the early dating of the scrolls and maintained they were medieval forgeries, and that in the face of the most rigorous testing of the physical evidence. Imagine the donnybrook that Smith's quaint explanation of the "disappearance" of the "original documents" would have precipitated, had a Zeitlin been around to do his thing. Indeed, we have to imagine it, since, in the case of the historical Jesus, too little evidently was at stake to maintain rigorous standards of verification even of physical evidence. The wording indeed! How self-serving! For that, a good critical edition would have sufficed to make the forgery easy, if still a work of formidable erudition (not to say, magnificent obsession).

Smith makes much of the correctness of the fragment's vocabulary. Quesnell points out that if a Morton Smith can check the correctness of the letters' vocabulary and phrase construction against the 1936 critical edition of the works of Clement, any other forger can have done the same: "so could a mystifier have checked every word and phrase with the same index and successfully eliminated them [errors] from the first draft of a mystification whatever was not characteristic of Clement." So he notes, "there is no physical evidence to compel admitting a date earlier than 1936." Quesnell states matters very simply: "What Smith is able to 'authenticate, the 'mystifier' would have been able to imitate."

Smith argued on the basis of mistakes a forger would have been stupid to make. But Quesnell responds: "If Smith can construct arguments for genuineness from his insights into what a forger would not have done. . . , there seems to be no reason why an intelligent mystifier could not have foreseen such arguments and added some 'untypical' elements as indispensable to a successful mystification."

There certainly was opportunity to introduce the volume of Clement into the library; there is no difficulty imagining a motivation. Quesnell never said in so many words that he thought Smith in particular had forged the Clement fragment, only that it is a "mystification" by a "mystifier." He notes, "Smith tells . . . [that Arthur Darby Nock . . .] refused till the day he died to admit the authenticity of the letter, suggesting instead that it was 'mystification for the sake of mystification' " And, Quesnell goes on, "'Secret Gospel' is written 'for the one who knows'. Who is 'the one who knows'? What does he know?" Discretion (not to mention not wanting to be sued for libel) certainly can account for Quesnell's sage reluctance to answer his own questions; but plenty of others did so privately, and the entire quest for the historical Jesus fell under a shadow for some time to come: if this, then what is impossible?

I dwell on a memorable academic scandal of our own times not to recount the suspicions of more than a few that Smith forged the Clement fragment, but to recall the moment at which, to outsiders to the entire enterprise, the very worth of the work came under suspicion. A field of learning that cannot defend itself from forgery and fraud commands no claim on a continued place in the academy. For here we deal not merely with a naughty opinion or the thirst for scandal, but with out-and-out fakery. Not only so, but a field of learning that validates even its existence by assuming that documents of religious faith conceal fraud—the Gospel truth is true only some of the time, and we'll find out when—surely meets its match in a secret gospel no one is permitted to examine but everyone expected to believe. The very convention of the field—always talking about "the historical Jesus," never "Jesus Christ"—signals its *a priori*. Presently, we shall see how the theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, underscores that irony: the very premises of learning dictate the results.

I do not mean to suggest that scholarship on religions, including their histories, ought merely paraphrase the texts, far from it. But I do think that scholars owe that upon which they work a measure of dignity, and owe themselves a moment of esteem. Much is to be done with the sources on which we work, including a labor of historical refinement,⁵ without our placing ourselves in the position of judgment upon the faith of other people. Ours is, after all, not a theological task; but if we make it so, then other rules, besides those

5. As the founder—and, to date, one of the handful of practitioners—of the historical-critical study of the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah in late antiquity, adapting the methods of form-criticism, historical criticism, history of religion, and the social study of religion to the study of the formation of Judaism, I believe I have amply paid my dues to the critical school; indeed, in my field of work, I claim to have

of skepticism, doubt, and militant unbelief, must operate. It is the simple fact that people may say whatever they wish about "the Jesus of history," there being no appeal to a common court of evidence, method, argument, rational exchange of opinion; if anything goes, then nothing can go right. But Meier and Crossan explain and defend their work, as we shall see, on blatantly theological grounds, never asking, what has Voltaire to tell us about Jesus Christ, or Ranke about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!

Still, theirs are magnificent and successful efforts to rehabilitate a field of learning that had fallen in disgrace, made doubters collapse in laughter at its "final" results not fifteen years ago. For, in this context Meier's and Crossan's books should be read as valiant efforts, in the face of the ridiculous and absurd, to establish the rationality and reputation of a failing enterprise. And each, in its way, forms a monument to intelligence, learning, judgment, and sound taste. Meier's book is a masterpiece of scholarship bridging the gap between the expert and the lay reader; it is a beautiful piece of writing and research; it is difficult to imagine a finer presentation of the state of questions, beginning to end. Anyone who values learning will read the notes first; the text is clear and undemanding; the notes superb and enlightening. Meier sets forth the evidence, the issue of method, and then what he thinks we can know about the life of Jesus before his public career (volume two will proceed from there).

Meier leads us through the path toward "the Jesus whom we can recover by using the scientific tools of modern historical research." He offers these criteria for deciding what comes from Jesus: the criterion of embarrassment (the Church later on will have been embarrassed by a saying, so it must be authentic); the criterion of discontinuity (the same approach, now discontinuity from Judaism); the criterion of multiple attestation; the criterion of coherence; the criterion of rejection and execution (he did something to alienate powerful people). Meier lists as dubious criteria those of [1] traces of

founded that school and to have rendered obsolete all prior historical work on the sources I command (and which, as a matter of fact, I had to translate for the first time, or retranslate in a proper analytical manner for the first time). I spell this out in *Studying Classical Judaism: A Primer* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). In *Reading and Believing: Ancient Judaism and Contemporary Gullibility* (BJS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) I show precisely how past and contemporary scholars, even the younger ones, believe whatever the sources say, except where they don't; and form their questions within the premise that answers inhere in the sources—but then are forced to accept at face value the attributions of sayings to given names, on the one side, and the narrative of events as reliable accounts of what people really said and did. In this respect, I found Meier far better informed and more up to date than Crossan, who cannot be said to know much about rabbinic sources but who—in telling us about "Judaism" as he wants it to have been uses them pretty much as he wishes anyhow.

Aramaic; [2] the Palestinian environment (what would fit into that time and place); [3] vividness of narration; [4] tendencies of the developing synoptic tradition; [5] historical presumption. This last point shades over into theological debate: "This criterion brings us squarely into the debate about where the 'burden of proof' lies: on the side of the critic who denies historicity or on the side of the critic who affirms it?" This brief summary of the first half of the book more than 200 pages—gives no adequate appreciation of how beautifully Meier expounds each problem in sequence, with a clarity in his text, a scholarly mastery in his notes, without parallel in the recent past. If you want to know whatever there is to know about what people think about the historical Jesus, you must start in this book.

And yet, with the masterful notes in hand, we form the strong impression that scholarship here consists of collecting opinions and commenting on them; the evidence is still what it is: religious faith forming the story of a unique person, "God with us," God incarnate; a man who was crucified and rose from the dead. But scholars' opinions provide no primary evidence concerning the first century, only our own. Some years back I lectured at Boston University and was asked a question with no bearing on my lecture: "Tell me, what was it really like in the first century?" I replied, "I don't know, I wasn't there." But, it is clear, we deal with a field in which people take in one another's washing. Then why bother?

Meier forthrightly responds in this-worldly terms: "the quest for the historical Jesus can be very useful if one is asking about faith seeking understanding, i.e., theology, in a contemporary context . . . faith in Christ today must be able to reflect on itself systematically in a way that will allow an appropriation of the quest for the historical Jesus into theology." This is for four reasons. First, "the quest for the historical Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of and adherence to a particular person who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history. Second, the quest affirms that the risen Jesus is the same person who lived and died as a Jew . . . a person as truly and fully human . . . as any other human being. Third, the quest for the historical Jesus . . . has tended to emphasize the embarrassing, nonconformist aspects of Jesus. . . . Fourth, historical Jesus "subverts not just some ideologies but all ideologies. . . ." And, he concludes, "the historical Jesus is a bulwark against the reduction of Christian faith . . . to 'relevant' ideology of any stripe. His refusal to be held fast by any given school of thought is what drives theologians onward into new paths; hence the historical Jesus remains a constant stimulus to theological renewal."

Now, with the best will in the world, these apologia strike me as nothing other than constructive theology masquerading as history and in the name of a healthy religious intellect claiming the authority of reasoned, historical scholarship. When, presently, we consider Joseph Ratzinger's critique of much scholarship on the historical Jesus, we shall find just his insistence that, replacing theology as the arbiter of truth, history is given a weight hardly justified by even the pertinence of its methods—or even of its premises, which, in context, are simply irrelevant to what is subject to discussion.⁶ Why ask history to settle questions that Meier himself specifies as fundamentally religious, matters of not fact but faith? And since when do matters of fact have any bearing on the truths of faith? Real historians do not give reasons such as these for writing, e.g., lives of Hitler and Stalin; I look in vain in Allan Bullock's *Parallel Lives*⁷ for a counterpart to Meier's (and Crossan's) explanation of their lives of Jesus, and the comparison between his explanation of his work and theirs of their biographies leaves no doubt that his is a historical, theirs a theological, agendum.

Meier says we are going to talk about the Jesus whom we can recover "by using the scientific tools of modern historical research." But concerning no other person or subject does scholarship yield the results that this "quest" is asked to provide. When, three decades ago, I wrote on the life of Yohanan ben Zakkai, Eliezer b. Hyrcanus,

6. And yet, for the study of biography in antiquity, before the Church fathers with their voluminous writings, well preserved, we have few figures nearly so well documented as is Jesus. Take Judaism, for instance. Not a single rabbi represented in Talmudic literature is given anything like a biography, let alone four of them; no rabbi left anything like "Q." All rabbis' statements are reworked into documents representing a consensus of their framers. Excluding only a handful, those who flourished at the end of the second century and are represented in the Mishnah ca. 200, not a single rabbi of antiquity is attested in a document that (we suppose) reached closure within so close a span of time after his death as is Jesus by the Gospels. New Testament scholars searching for the historical Jesus happily introduce as fact sayings in the names of figures assumed to have flourished in the first century, even though those sayings occur in documents that reached closure anywhere from two hundred to a thousand years later. Culbertson, cited above, believes about the inerrancy of the Talmud when it comes to citing rabbis what he denies about the inerrancy of the Gospels when it comes to citing Jesus. Not only so, but New Testament scholars happily treat as fact concerning the first century any available pastiche of what Judaism said or did or taught or practiced, formed of sherds and remnants in writings over a period of a thousand years, even though these same scholars pounce with glee upon the slightest hint of anachronism, apologetic harmonization (who opens a "harmony of the Gospels" and tells us about Jesus Christ?), or other intellectual gaffes. Exemplary in every way, Meier is fully informed of the critical agenda of rabbinic literature that I have invented and honors it, and in this, as in other ways, his book marks the coming of age of Gospels' research in its encounter with "Judaism."

7. New York: Knopf, 1992.

and a gaggle of named Pharisaic authorities,⁸ no one imagined that my task was to remind faithful Jews that "faith in the Torah is not just a vague existential attitude." Meier's claim that "the risen Jesus" is the same person who lived and died as a Jew falls entirely outside of his methodological strictures; only in the context of Christian faith does that statement bear any meaning at all. But Christian faith requires no merely historical Jesus, bereft of miracles and dead like any other man, having, after all, the entirety of Jesus Christ, God, son of God, God incarnate, and all the rest. What has that incarnate God to do with Meier's results achieved with "the scientific tools of modern historical research"? In the case of research on ancient rabbis, or on the historical Socrates for that matter, who ever heard of the requirement that the results emphasize "the embarrassing, non-conformist aspects," and what biography of Caesar Augustus subverts any ideologies? At stake for Meier are profoundly religious sentiments and experiences, and to these, historical facts are simply, monumentally irrelevant.

John Dominic Crossan's *Historical Jesus* is a very different book, but an equally substantial one. For reading, it is more compelling; as scholarship, it is no where near so definitive as Meier's. Crossan writes better, but he tells his own story (which may be why his writing is more engaging.) While Meier concerns himself with issues of method, analysis of sources, and above all, a broad account of the received scholarly literature, telling us where the field stands, Crossan

8. I started with a methodologically perfectly standard biography, *A Life of Yohanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), which was awarded the Abraham Berliner Prize in Jewish History by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and was even translated into Japanese. But, troubled by the gap between the methods prevailing in the study of the rabbinic sources as history and those characteristic of Gospels research, I went back and wrote *Development of a Legend. Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: Brill, 1970). This was followed by *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1971), and then *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. The Tradition and the Man* (Leiden: Brill, 1973). At that point I concluded that in no way is biography possible on the foundations of the kind of evidence produced by the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah, and set out to determine what kind of history we can learn. My quest for the intellectual context of rabbinic writing in late antiquity was accorded a uniformly negative reception among scholars in my field; I could not publish a scholarly book in the USA for the first twenty years of my career, from 1960 to 1981. And even as late as 1984, when, in Europe and the USA, my results were accorded an appropriate hearing, the Israel Historical Society invited, but then disinvited me as their principal lecturer for their fiftieth anniversary celebration of their "historical" journal, *Tarbiz*, merely because, in the address I sent in advance for translation into Hebrew, I stated very simply the message that, having read every article on what they call "Talmudic history" in *Tarbiz* for its first fifty years, I have to declare everything they have printed to be historically worthless, measured by the criterion of critical history: gullible, just that. The disinvitation came by return mail.

wishes to present something other than a reference work. His is, rather, an account of how he wishes us to see things, an intensely powerful and poetic book by a great writer who also is an original and weighty scholar. Here is a book to be read for the text, not only or mainly the notes, of which, in fact, there are none.

Here is a life of Jesus in the grand tradition: narrative, reflective, a pronouncement, not merely a protocol and account of learning as it is. Crossan begins with an account of the empire and its life, the faith and life of Israel, the categories into which Jesus has been cast: visionary and teacher, peasant and protester, magician and prophet, bandit and messiah, rebel and revolutionary. He moves us on to John and Jesus, kingdom and wisdom, magic and meal, death and burial, resurrection and authority. The upshot of this eloquent story is this:

That ecstatic vision and social program sought to rebuild a society upward from its grass roots but on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism, with free healing brought directly to the peasant homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return. The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal miracle and table, free comparison and open commensality, was a challenge launched not just at Judaism's strictest purity regulations, or even at the Mediterranean's patriarchal combination of honor and shame, patronage and clientage, but at civilization's eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discriminations.

Clearly, we are in the hands of a master. But Crossan's book is personal, Meier's, a definitive account of the state of pretty much every question he treats; if I have to recommend only one book on the historical Jesus, it must be Meier's. Anyone with time to read more than one will want them both, the one for its masterful, enlightened learning, the other for its passionate art.⁹

And, as a master, Crossan concludes,

This book . . . is a scholarly reconstruction of the historical Jesus. And if one were to accept its formal methods and even their material investments, one could surely offer divergent interpretative conclusions about the reconstructable historical Jesus. But one cannot dismiss it or the search for the historical Jesus as mere reconstruction, as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is only reconstruction. For a believing Christian both the life of the word of

9. But the comparison is not entirely fair to Meier, since here we have only volume I, and it is in volume II that he reaches the standard agenda of the historical Jesus: as he lived, did wonders, taught, died, and rose from the dead. So the two books are asymmetrical at this time. In any case, faced with a choice, I should not deny myself the pleasure of Meier's brilliant footnotes, nor the certainties of his reasoned, judicious, and prudent text, in favor of Crossan's more eloquent and personal prose.

God and the test of the Word of God are like a graded process of historical reconstruction. . . . If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in.

Indeed. How that apologia conforms to the rules of secular historical research I cannot say. That is the very nub of the matter, and we come to a weighty critic of just this conclusion: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. In a variety of important and authoritative papers, such as his Ingersoll Lecture, he has made these points—quite properly, in the setting of Catholic faith, but in the context of the claim not to theological truth but merely critical historical knowledge advanced in the quest of the historical Jesus.¹⁰ The method itself dictates scandalous results: "La fede non è un elemento costitutivo del metodo e Dio non è un fattore di cui occorre tener conto nell'avvenimento storico." At the same time, exegesis forms an important requirement of theology: "The more prudent among systematic theologians seek to produce a theology independent, so far as is possible, from exegesis: "Ma quale valore può avere una teologia che si separa dalle proprie fondamenta?"

So, Ratzinger argues, it is necessary to raise the question of hermeneutics:

la spiegazione del processo storico non sarebbe che una parte del compito dell'interprete; l'altra sarebbe la comprensione del testo nell'oggi. Di conseguenza, occorrerebbe indagare sulle condizioni del comprendere stesso così da giungere ad una attualizzazione del testo che vada oltre una 'anatomia del defunto' puramente storica.

How, he asks, is it possible to come to a comprehension which will not be founded on the arbitrary decisions of my own presuppositions, "una comprensione che me permetta veramente d'intendere il messaggio del testo, restituendomi qualcosa che non viene da me stesso?" The answer is a correct hermeneutic: "so l'ermeneutica deve diventare convincente, occorre innanzitutto che scopra un'armonia tra l'analisi storica e la sintesi ermeneutica."

In that context, Ratzinger's critique of Dibelius and Bultmann—the finest minds in the two hundred year quest, and the most important ones—takes on substantial weight. At issue are the premises and presuppositions in play, along the lines of my opening remarks on the peculiarity of a reading of the Gospels that begins with the principle that the topics most critical to the Gospels lie simply outside of all

10. "L'interpretazione biblica in conflitto. Problemi del fondamento ed orientamento dell' esegesi contemporanea," in Ignace de la Potterie, Romano Guardini, Joseph Ratzinger, Giuseppe Colombo, and Enzo Bianchi, *L'Esegesi cristiana oggi* (Rome, 1992), 93-125. The several quotations all cite this important article.

discourse: miracles, resurrection, and the like. So I find it easy to concur: "Di contro, in Dibelius e Bultmann, tutto ciò è degenerato in uno schema evolutivo d'un semplicità quasi intollerabile. . . . *Con tali presupposti, la figura di Gesù è predeterminata*" [italics mine]. To make my point, we need not pursue the details of the constructive program that Ratzinger lays out; it suffices to say that the italicized sentence raises a challenge to all those, Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic (and even Jewish) scholars, theologians manqués to a man, who deem "the historical Jesus" a truly secular, this-worldly-historical quest. Ratzinger makes the point, which is amply illustrated by Meier and Crossan, that at issue in the historical Jesus is the Christ of faith. Crossan's (somewhat strident) concluding sentences say so in so many words, and Meier's characteristically more prudent remarks make the same point as well. Meier and Crossan, masters of the craft, turn out to validate Ratzinger's point of insistence: let theology be theology, but also address issues of history.

After all, as head of the Holy Office, Ratzinger does not require Meier's reminder that "Christian faith is the affirmation of and adherence to a particular person who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history." Nor has Ratzinger forgotten Nicaea and Chalcedon, so he does not need Meier's historical results to affirm Jesus Christ (to use Christian language) as a person as truly and fully human "as any other human being." And if Nicaea and Chalcedon knew that, so too did the Evangelists, and that is why they wrote what they did about Jesus. But it seems to me, no Christian can agree that Jesus really "subverts not just some ideologies," since, after all, there still is Christianity, and Christianity does believe that Jesus stands for not the subversion of all false things but the foundation of the true theology of his Church, whichever one among many it may be.

All of this then shows how disingenuous is the quest for the historical Jesus. Beginning, middle, and end the issue is theological, and the challenge, to mediate between theological truth and historical fact—if and when they meet. So let them meet, as, in these two books, they do not meet. Certainly, a debate between Crossan and Ratzinger, moderated by Meier, would give us a splendid evening. But now, it is time to get back to work. The quest for the historical Jesus is monumentally irrelevant to the study of history, in which those who pursue that quest are not engaged and by which they are not even motivated, or history of (a) religion, in which many of us are engaged, even when we come to Christianity in its initial century. The quest for the historical Jesus forms a brief chapter in Christian theology of our own times. That field of learning supplies data for the

history of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries-- that alone, and, as we now know that quest, precious little information of high consequence about the first century.¹¹

11. I wrote this review while a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University, and express my hearty thanks to the President and Fellows for their cordial and exemplary hospitality. I have never worked in a more congenial academic environment.