

The Historical Jesus: Then and Now

In the ancient and medieval periods, there was no problem of the historical Jesus since no distinction was made between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Since the late 19th century, a central issue has been whether Jesus was primarily a teacher or an apocalyptic prophet.

The Enlightenment

Some Enlightenment thinkers were materialists and atheists. Others, especially those belonging to a closely related movement which historians called 'Deism', attempted to reconcile faith and science. Contrary to traditional 'theism', the Deists argued that God was the first cause of all things and the originator of the immutable laws of nature, but that these laws exclude the possibility of miracles or direct divine intervention.

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Reimarus

The Deist who had the greatest influence on research on the historical Jesus was Hermann Reimarus (1718-1768). He believed that only a rational religion could benefit humanity. He argued that Jesus did not intend to found a new religion, but to present himself as a political Messiah who would liberate the Jewish people from the power of Rome and re-establish an independent, earthly, kingdom of Israel.

Strauss

The next scholar to have an enormous influence on research on the historical Jesus was David Friedrich Strauss. The purpose of his book was to present the mythical approach to the life of Jesus in order to replace the antiquated systems of supernaturalism and naturalism. With the exception of the exorcisms, the miracles attributed to Jesus did not actually happen, according to Strauss. The miracle stories are expressions and illustrations of the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah.

Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) was familiar with apocalyptic works first discovered in the 19th century, as well as with those which were already well known. He argued that when Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, he was not speaking about a just and moral society to be established by human beings, but about the new age described by the apocalypses that God would bring about.

Bultmann

Rudolf Bultmann (1926) accepted Schweitzer's historical argument that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. He agreed that Jesus' point of view was mythical, and he used existentialist philosophy to 'demythologize' the teachings of Jesus. He reinterpreted Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God in terms of an entirely future power that wholly determines the present. Although people today no longer expect God to intervene in history and establish a new age, each of us must face our own deaths, and this expectation is analogous to that of Jesus. Since we face an inevitable death, we ought to focus on the necessity and significance of decision.

The renewed quest

Under the influence of neo-orthodox theology, the quest for the historical Jesus was relegated to the sidelines as irrelevant for Christian theology, which, it was argued, is based on the apostolic witness, not on the teaching of Jesus. However, in the 1950s, scholars reopened the question of the historical Jesus, arguing that it was necessary for the Christian faith that continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith be established. Günther Bornkamm published a consensus portrait of Jesus under the title *Jesus of Nazareth* in 1956. The standard portrait, however, was rather bland and failed to take the Jewishness of Jesus seriously enough. Some scholars even doubted the Jewish nature of Galilee, but recent archaeological studies have established that Galilee was virtually as Jewish as Judea at the time of Jesus. Mark A. Chancey (2002) has given an excellent summary of the evidence.

Sanders

E. P. Sanders (1985) argued that it is difficult to move from "Jesus the teacher" to "Jesus, a Jew who was crucified, who was the leader of a group that survived his death, which in turn was persecuted, and which formed a messianic sect that was finally successful." He concluded that Jesus should be interpreted as a prophet of the restoration of Israel. He expected God to intervene soon to establish a new and glorious age, but one that is distinctly more secular than the apocalyptic vision reconstructed by Schweitzer.

Crossan

The work of John Dominic Crossan (1991) contrasts sharply with Sanders' work. Crossan attempts to eliminate the apocalyptic aspect of the activities and teachings of Jesus. He discredits apocalypticism by associating the ancient apocalypses with the militant activists in the late Second Temple period. In other words, he links the apocalyptic perspective with violence and assassination. He also claims that the sources that portray Jesus as a wisdom teacher or sage are older than those that present him and his message in prophetic and apocalyptic terms. Crossan concludes that Jesus proclaimed and founded an egalitarian kingdom of nobodies whom Jesus sent out to exchange a miracle for a meal, i.e. healing for hospitality. Although Crossan portrays Jesus and his followers as rural and thus as 'peasants', he also claims that they were similar to Cynic philosophers. The Cynic movement, however, was an urban phenomenon.

Criticism of the quest

In the 1990s, some scholars criticized the whole enterprise of research into the historical Jesus. One of these, Dieter Georgi (1992), argued that the aim of Reimarus and others who took up the quest for the historical Jesus after him was not neutral, but had a clear theological purpose: to gain a verifiable reconstruction of the public career of Jesus of Nazareth and to put this reconstruction into the center of reflection on theology and faith, turning this ‘true’ Jesus into the center of theological discourse. He argued further that “The contemporaneity of the New Quest with the end of the New Deal and the restoration of the bourgeoisie in the United States and Germany after World War II and within the confines of a burgeoning market-oriented Atlantic community is not accidental.”

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1997) argued that the two dominant hermeneutical approaches in Jesus research are historical positivism (represented by Crossan) and canonical, theological positivism (the approach taken by Luke Timothy Johnson). She claimed that the flood of allegedly new scholarly and popular books on Jesus does nothing to undermine fundamentalist desires for a reliable account of the historical Jesus or religious certainty about the meaning of his life. At best, one can glimpse the historical shadow of Jesus, but how ‘his picture’ develops will always depend on the lens through which one looks, that is, on the re-constructive model adopted.

Meier

John P. Meier published three volumes on the historical Jesus under the overarching title: *A Marginal Jew*. A fourth volume is projected. This work is a model of secular, skeptical historiography, but no doubt post-modernists, such as Georgi and Schüssler Fiorenza, would call it ‘positivist’.

The historical Jesus now

During his lifetime, Jesus attracted some followers as an authoritative teacher. Others followed him as a prophet proclaiming the Kingdom of God, while yet others followed him as an exorcist who had the power to overcome evil spirits. It is likely that some drew the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah even during his lifetime. This response was due in part to his authoritative and charismatic actions and in part to the readiness of a segment of the people to look for an alternative to the rule of the Romans and their client-kings, the Herodians. The crowds that Jesus drew no doubt attracted the attention of the authorities. Not long after they heard some people proclaim him as king and saw him overturn tables in the Temple, they arrested him and executed him. This event must have been a devastating shock to his followers. Some of them interpreted his execution as the typical fate of a prophet.

It is much more surprising that other followers of Jesus interpreted his death as the pre-ordained death of the Messiah. Rather than giving up the idea that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel because he suffered and died, instead of leading the people to victory over the Romans, this group of followers reinterpreted the concept of the Messiah. They looked to scripture for guidance and became convinced that the psalms of individual lament, such as Psalm 22 and 69, and the passage about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 showed that the suffering and death of the Messiah was part of the divine plan. They concluded that it was the risen Jesus,

not the earthly one, who would rule over all creation as God's agent. Jesus, they believed, was already exalted to heaven and had begun to rule. His reign would be fully manifest in the future when he would be revealed as the Son of Man, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel 7:13.

It is impossible to know whether Jesus considered himself to be the Messiah. He presented himself as a prophet, perhaps at least implicitly as the final and most authoritative prophet. He was a teacher with extraordinary authority, and he was believed to have performed at least one type of mighty deed. These qualities made him stand out as a leader and a focal point for the hopes and expectations of those who were dissatisfied with the current order. Although Jesus showed no interest in leading a revolt, his talk about the Kingdom of God and his extraordinary qualities were apparently enough to lead those with high hopes for a new order to fix those hopes on him.

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