

## Martin Kähler's 'Historic Biblical Christ'

### Part I

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In his seminal work, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*,<sup>1</sup> Martin Kähler succeeded in beginning the dismantling of theological liberalism's Enlightenment-inspired pursuit of the 'historical Jesus', and in planting the seeds for a different kind of Jesus-seeking methodology.<sup>2</sup> In a previous article, I attempted a somewhat in-depth evaluation of Kähler's first 'task', and found his negative appraisal of theological liberalism's historical Jesus project to be mostly well placed.<sup>3</sup> In the present article, I will offer an evaluation of Kähler's 'historic biblical Christ' proposal, which was his attempt to meet his latter task. Digesting the previous article might prove helpful for the reader, since the present article will touch in summary form on relevant issues covered in more detail there.

It is worth noting at the outset that an appraisal of Kähler's thought should not be seen as a backward-looking academic exercise with little contemporary relevance. Not only did Kähler's views influence several scholarly giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Kähler himself continues to have attention paid directly to his own proposals.<sup>4</sup> As we'll see, his 'historic biblical Christ' approach to Christology is wide-ranging in scope and at times complex. But aspects of his approach

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<sup>1</sup> Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Originally published in German in 1892.

<sup>2</sup> This was, in fact, his aim. "My task is then a twofold one: (1) to criticize and reject the wrong aspects of [theological liberalism's] approach to the life of Jesus and (2) to establish the validity of an alternative approach." Ibid, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, "Martin Kähler and the 'Historical Jesus'" *Biblical Perspectives Magazine* 25, no. 40 (October 1-7, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Two recent anthologies chronicling mostly 'modern' Jesus research give focused attention to Kähler, while in contrast, treating other major scholars less prominently or not at all. See Schröter and Jacobi (eds.), *The Jesus Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 63-70, and Brown and Evans, *A History of the Quests for the Historical Jesus*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), I: 281-284. This speaks to Kähler's ongoing and even increasing relevance. As an aside, though mostly unrelated to our present study, one should also not forget Kähler's influential contribution to missiology. A collection of his missional writings was published in German in 1971, and it is here where readers will find Kähler's highly provocative assertion that mission was the mother of theology, meaning that theological development and formulation occurred within the context of mission.

remain appealing today and provide ample space for thoughtful interaction either in agreement or disagreement.

## Introduction

By the time Kähler delivered his lectures of 1891 which were encapsulated in and later expanded upon in his *So-Called Historical Jesus*, the German theological scene had been engrossed for decades in a quest to find the real-life Jesus of history. One basic operating premise of this pursuit was that the Gospel accounts were a mix of history and theology, fact and interpretation, truth and faith. From this emerged what became an axiomatic study of and contrast between the earthly Jesus of history and the exalted Christ of faith. To varying degrees, scholars created a wedge between these two concepts of Jesus and juxtaposed them against each other. A common result of the time, that continues today in scholars who accept these premises, is that the Christian confession of the resurrected and exalted Christ of faith (the *kerygma*) had to be set aside if the goal was to find the real Jesus of history. This became the underlying slab upon which the so-called quest of the 'historical Jesus' and the various Jesus biographies it produced were built.

From our previous article, it was clear that Kähler did not believe that the various versions of the 'historical Jesus' proposed by theological liberalism were or ever could be the proper object of faith. Kähler demonstrably broke with the notion that a true picture of the Jesus of history could only be ascertained by discarding the theological dogma of the Christian confession about him. Kähler instead believed that the Christian confession, in contrast to historical fact-finding, was the only way through which the real Jesus could be accessed and grasped. But if the Christian should put their faith in the exalted Christ of the *kerygma*, does that render the earthly Jesus moot? Is the Christ of faith the same as the Jesus of history? How is Lessing's ditch between normative and situational truth<sup>5</sup> to be leaped so that the safe harbor for certain faith that Kähler sought could be found? It is here that Kähler both affirms and denies the reliability of the Bible, which then manifests itself in his highly influential 'historic biblical Christ'. We will look first at Kähler's views of Scripture and dogma, which will then lead to his picture of a historic and biblical Christ as the ground and content of faith. I will then offer an evaluation.

## Kähler's Nuanced View of the Bible

Kähler is sometimes characterized as a 'biblical realist'. I find this to be a rather unhelpful description because it obscures the main point driving Kähler's

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<sup>5</sup> There are other ways of casting this 'ditch'. Universal principles/categories versus particular truths/events. Closer to our purposes, theology/faith versus facts/history. And importantly, abstractionism versus direct access.

approach. In summary, Kähler attempted to adopt the view that the Bible's dogma of apostolic faith in the resurrected Christ should be considered the normative starting point in our understanding of Jesus as opposed to the dogma of historical investigations governed by modern moods into a Jesus supposedly lurking behind the texts.<sup>6</sup> This matters because as we'll see, it says much about what Kähler thinks is important and unimportant about the Bible and Jesus himself. This sentiment is perhaps best expressed by Kähler thusly: "[T]he fact that we know of no form of Christian preaching older than our Bible is, from the standpoint of *historical science*, more certain than the fact that Jesus of Nazareth ever lived."<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, because Kähler insists that it is the biblical Christ that should be the ground of faith, we need to take some time at the outset to discuss his views on Scripture.

While Kähler thought theological liberalism was mishandling the Bible in its Jesus reconstructions, he also had deep concerns with the orthodox Protestant view of the Bible. Kähler builds an argument that while the Bible is a "unique"<sup>8</sup> book, the pre-literary "fallible tradition"<sup>9</sup> accompanied by a "carefree"<sup>10</sup> mode of transmission, coupled with the Gospels lacking "a rigorous striving for accuracy of observation or for preservation of detail"<sup>11</sup> makes an inerrancy position untenable. In doing this, Kähler adopts and accepts the results of critical scholarship, and labels religion based on an inerrancy position as an "authoritarian faith".<sup>12</sup> Kähler asserts that the Bible "does not remotely resemble a set of doctrinal propositions,"<sup>13</sup> nor is it a "drill manual or a book of elementary pedagogy."<sup>14</sup> He also repeatedly rejects the concept of "verbal inspiration".<sup>15</sup>

Kähler goes on to concede even more ground to biblical skepticism. The sources and origins of the biblical documents are uncertain and even undiscoverable.<sup>16</sup> The earliest tradition about Jesus and how it branched into multiple streams of

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<sup>6</sup> As an example, "How much misunderstanding and futile effort the biographers might have spared themselves, had they, for instance, taken seriously the announcement of the passion and the 'idea of the parousia' exactly as they are stated." Kähler, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 139. Stated another way, my view is that Kähler is saying the existence of the confessional dogma about Jesus (the *kerygma*) is more historically established than the historical facts of Jesus' earthly life. The steppingstone to Tillich and Bultmann (and arguably Wobbermin) is obvious here, although both went much farther in their skepticism of ascertaining the Jesus of history than Kähler, as we'll see.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 88-90.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 89. Kähler goes on to say that the second evangelist (Mark) "is known for his tendency to 'touch up' his account..." (93)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 136. See also 106, 129-130, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 113, 115, 117-118, 140. He elsewhere refers to verbal inspiration as a "hypothesis" in a negative, crutch-like way (p.127).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 90-91, 101.

tradition as represented by the different Gospels is untraceable.<sup>17</sup> Attempts to harmonize “much disputed and disconnected”<sup>18</sup> material in the Gospels is “in vain”.<sup>19</sup> The Gospels “cannot be traced with certainty to eyewitnesses.”<sup>20</sup> He critiques the inerrancy position of Protestant orthodoxy as not emanating from the Bible itself, but rather “from those requirements which it thinks it must and therefore can posit in order to have a trustworthy transmission of revelation.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on to assert that the doctrine of inerrancy is actually a deficient view of the Bible’s authority and a “hindrance to faith” due to its adherents constantly being put on the defensive each time any detail in the Bible is questioned or challenged.<sup>22</sup>

One might reasonably conclude from this brief survey that Kähler was roundly skeptical of the Bible’s overall reliability. But perhaps surprisingly, this is not at all the case. Standing side by side with his negative appraisal above is a regular and even necessary drumbeat of the Bible’s trustworthiness. Despite all the statements chronicled above, Kähler insists that the Bible is in “agreement” with other historical evidence and that its “comparatively remarkable trustworthiness will be appreciated, even the trustworthiness of the legends” once we no longer insist that every detail in the biblical record must be proven correct.<sup>23</sup> He therefore believes the Bible provides a trustworthy picture of Jesus, and that the Gospels in fact provide the only real picture of Jesus available to us.<sup>24</sup> Kähler believes the Bible should be considered a “normative authority” by Christians.<sup>25</sup> In cases where the Gospels diverge with each other in the details, we should not be concerned because they agree on the whole and provide a coherent picture of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Kähler makes much of the idea that the Holy Spirit guided the followers of Jesus, including the biblical writers, to a proper remembrance and understanding of Jesus, and that this work of the Spirit continues to guide the church throughout time.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 50. See also p.90. Here, Kähler specifically cites the “meager prospects” of harmonizing the Gospel accounts regarding the day the crucifixion occurred. I strongly part company with Kähler here and have addressed this ‘problem’ in detail in my unpublished “Is the Gospel of John Historically Reliable (Part 2)” in “Defending the Gospel of John”, written in 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 75-76, 114-115, 140-141.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 141-142. Importantly, Kähler footnotes this statement and says he’s using the word ‘legend’ here as a kind of substitute for ‘oral tradition’. The ‘trustworthiness’ he therefore seems to ascribe to the oral tradition is interesting given his other statements about the supposed uncertainty and fallibility of the tradition as well as the means of transmission. In this footnote, Kähler approvingly cites Heb. 2.3 as a kind of guarantor of the reliability of the Jesus tradition passed down into the biblical accounts.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 48, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 126, 131, 139, 147.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 50, 86, 88-89. The positive title of Chapter 2 of his book is “The Foundation of Faith in the Christ of the Whole Bible”.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 66-67, 90-91, 94, 97, 127. But see pp.49 and 128 where Kähler appears to cast doubt on this, at least as it relates to the Gospels. The subject of remembrance and memory as it relates to

Kähler further insists that the whole Bible speaks of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Here, Kähler goes against the grain in two notable respects. First, he breaks rather strongly with the mood in vogue at the time, and still today, that there is great discontinuity between the Jesus presented in the Gospels and the Jesus one finds in the Pauline corpus. Instead, Kähler believes Paul's writings (and Acts) correlate rather well to the Jesus given to us in the Gospels.<sup>29</sup> Second, Kähler is quite open in acknowledging the value and testimony of the Old Testament not only in understanding the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament, but in understanding Jesus himself.<sup>30</sup>

So how does Kähler attempt to reconcile what appears to be a paradoxical position of both affirming and denying the reliability of the Bible? He does so in several ways. First, Kähler sets the Bible apart from other literature and treats it as its own unique class.<sup>31</sup> He expressly rejects the Enlightenment view he locates mostly with Lessing that the Bible should be read (and analyzed) like any other book.<sup>32</sup> Just as Kähler believed historical critical analytics erroneously produced a lesser Jesus, so also such analytical methods degraded the Bible and failed to treat it as the unique and incomparable piece of revelation that it is.<sup>33</sup>

Second is Kähler's insistence that the Bible is written from the vantage point of faith, with the purpose of evoking faith. While containing history, the biblical books are not historical documents per se.<sup>34</sup> Regarding the four Gospels, Kähler declares:

I deny that the purpose of the Gospels is to serve as documents for a *scientifically reconstructed biography* of Jesus. They have not posited such a purpose for themselves, nor may the church or theology force it upon

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reliable transmission of the oral Jesus tradition into the written canon has become a major renewed focus of scholarship in recent decades. Dunn, Bauckham, and Keener (among others) have all made important contributions to this growing field of study, though their proposals differ somewhat from each other and have not gone unchallenged by more skeptical scholars. See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Keener, *Christobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 68, 86, 128. Though he doesn't say so, Kähler's view is consistent with Jesus' own hermeneutic in Luke 24.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 82-84, 94-95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 51-52, 85-86, 125, 130, 141. Not all German biblical scholars of the time were eager to incorporate the Hebrew Bible into their Jesus studies.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 78-79, 92, 122.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 104, 112, 118, 123-124.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 46, 126.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 126.

them as their essential purpose. Their purpose is to awaken faith in Jesus through a clear proclamation of his saving activity.<sup>35</sup>

One can see where Kähler is going with this. While the Gospels, in Kähler's view, do not provide what is needed for a reliable biography of Jesus (at least in the way the Jesus biographers were attempting), "A trustworthy picture of the Savior for believers is a very different thing..."<sup>36</sup> In fact, once the Bible's purpose is allowed to guide how it should be read and understood, Kähler regards Scripture as "completely perfect."<sup>37</sup> This, then, leads to what Kähler regards as an important insight. Once the New Testament is no longer seen as a set of historical texts, "Then the biblical documents would have a reliability *which lies completely beyond proof and which would preclude the necessity of submitting them to a scientific test.*"<sup>38</sup>

In the end, the trustworthiness of the Bible should be judged in view of its purpose. Kähler believes the grand purpose of the Bible is to declare the *kerygma* of Christ and espouse its dogma in such a way that faith is produced in individual people and perpetuated through the church. Under this standard, the Bible should be considered reliable. Kähler wants to have some grounding of faith in facts.<sup>39</sup> But he regards historical research as just another kind of subjectivism. So he pivots to the fact of the apostolic preaching<sup>40</sup> and its efficacy in the church and Christian lives.<sup>41</sup> He incorporates an experiential piece to the sureness of faith,<sup>42</sup> but he's not an all-out subjectivist grounding faith predominately or exclusively in human experience, contra the early Schleiermacher.<sup>43</sup> The Bible's picture of Jesus is the sure way to know Jesus. He regards the fact of the existence from the earliest days of the apostolic preaching about Christ and the dogma about him as unassailable,<sup>44</sup> certainly in comparison with the this and that of historical research into the Gospels. And by its very nature, it is this irreducibly dogmatic picture of Christ<sup>45</sup> in the Bible that lies beyond the reach of the historical-critical method.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 127. For Kähler, the Bible accomplishes this purpose through its presentation of the apostolic preaching which founded the church, which is still efficacious today in eliciting faith. Kähler emphasizes this repeatedly.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 126. Italics mine. See also 95.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 81 and especially 128-9, where the "historical fact" of the efficacy of the biblical preaching becomes a kind of proof of a supernatural endorsement of the Bible's authority in this area.

<sup>40</sup> By this, I mean that Kähler is saying there's no denying the historical fact that Christ and his "dogmatic significance" (Ibid, 89) were proclaimed by his followers from the earliest days. It did occur. For Kähler, a responsible view of the Bible and its contents, as well as who Jesus really is, must reckon with this reality that he importantly locates within history. See n.7.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 104-105, 112.

<sup>43</sup> Kähler critiques Herrmann on this as well. Ibid, 77. But note my later conclusion that Kähler was not only swimming in this pond, but swimming in the deep end.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 83-84.

<sup>45</sup> "Christian language about Christ must always take the form of a confession or a dogma." Ibid, 68. See also 77, 84.

That said, if the Bible is shown to be unreliable on matters unrelated to its purpose, this should not be ignored, for it does serve a useful role in defeating what Kähler believes to be false props for faith.<sup>46</sup> He believes in the value of historical research and even history itself.<sup>47</sup> But for Kähler, both are limited and can't provide the basis for an assured faith that he believes is the core aim of the Bible. This means the importance of such endeavors is decidedly secondary when it comes to biblical research and becomes destructive when elevated to a status of central importance such that it replaces the *kerygma* as the main thing.

Before we move directly into Kähler's 'historic biblical Christ', one additional point should be addressed. One might reasonably ask how it is that Kähler can be so sure of the reliability not just of the historical fact of the apostolic preaching, but also the dogmatic content of the preaching as reflected in the Bible. How does Kähler know that the dogmatic content about Jesus in the Bible is faithful to what was actually proclaimed in the early apostolic preaching? And even if we answer this in the affirmative, how does Kähler further know that such dogma is genuinely true and can therefore be believed if the historical-critical method is unable to answer the mail?<sup>48</sup> Is the content of the biblical *kerygma* fact or fiction?

The solution offered by Kähler is interdependently multi-faceted. While we saw in both the previous article and above that Kähler bucked a number of academic trends of his day, he was not a holistic scholarly renegade. In at least one critical respect, Kähler firmly planted himself in the mainstream mood of his day regarding the issue of abstractionism. German historicism eschewed (or at least attempted to eschew) general laws of history, believing such laws and categories were abstractions that were forced onto the data to make it fit into preconceived constructs that were often inaccurate and dulled the important particulars of historical events.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, a strong anti-abstraction mood took hold and found its way into many disciplines, including theology. Kähler followed suit. So while

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 114. Here, he claims adherence to the doctrine of inerrancy has created a "diseased condition in the life of our church".

<sup>47</sup> This remains a provocative assertion today for those who hold the view that Kähler had no use for history or historical investigation at all (I tend to put Norman Perrin in this category). I politely dissent from this view. There are simply too many places where Kähler is at least marginally positive about such things (Ibid, 46, 54, 67-69, 124, 144, 146, etc). And as we've seen, Kähler too is appealing to what he regards as historical facts to support his biblical trustworthiness position. He's just doing it differently than the Jesus biographers did, and in pursuit of different goals (Ibid, 69). I see Kähler as trying to find a mediating position between liberalism and orthodoxy, as he himself seems to indicate. Ibid, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>49</sup> As examples, historical constructs like the Renaissance and the Enlightenment can be (and are) seen as artificial abstractions that force a certain conformity onto the data and obscure the considerable diversity of thought, mood and intellectual crosscurrents that were present in both periods.

Kähler was less than impressed with the historicist program,<sup>50</sup> he nonetheless peaceably broke bread with its underlying anti-abstractionist premises.

Kähler periodically bemoans abstractionism in various forms.<sup>51</sup> Kähler instead insists on the need for direct access. He declares that encountering Jesus depends upon:

[A] tradition which possesses the inherent power to convince us of its divine authenticity. The datum must be 'directly accessible'. The Protestant Christian's independence of any form of imposed tutelage is not possible apart from the unique place occupied by the Bible. There must be for everyone a reliable means of access to the Christ of the whole Bible...<sup>52</sup>

Whether it is the application of the historical-critical method on one side, or the doctrine of inerrancy on the other, Kähler regards both as harmful abstractions that are foreign to the Bible itself that intrude on the cause of faith. Instead, the Bible should be regarded as providing direct access to the resurrected Christ for two reasons. First, as we've already discussed, the Holy Spirit ensured a proper remembrance of Jesus amongst his followers, including the biblical authors.<sup>53</sup> And second, Kähler asserts that Jesus himself "*is the originator of the biblical picture of the Christ.*"<sup>54</sup> He goes on to say that the picture of Christ handed to us in the Bible is of such "indelible preciseness" that it constitutes "powerful proof of how completely Christ had filled their minds and hearts."<sup>55</sup> He asserts that in the Gospels, we have the words of Jesus, and that "what he says of himself is in perfect harmony with what he is and does." The words of Jesus greatly aid us to properly understand him and his actions. Finally, he says, "Thus the Gospel portrayal of Jesus becomes for us a confirmation of his self-attestation, and his self-attestation becomes the seal on the portrayal of his nature."<sup>56</sup>

It is clear that Kähler did not at all see the dogmatically theologized Jesus as a fictional fabrication of the early church propagandized through the New Testament.<sup>57</sup> For Kähler, the New Testament provides direct access to the real Jesus because the real Jesus and his own teachings were the origins of the Gospel presentations of him, accurately preserved through the guiding of the

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<sup>50</sup> "It is therefore no theological crime if I evaluate [studying the Bible historically] less highly...than do others. For me the more important question is whether we can do justice to the Bible when we view it from the historical perspective alone." Ibid, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 46, 73, 121.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 122. See also 95, 119. The Lutheran allergy to mediators between God and humanity is front and center here and no doubt contributed to the larger anti-abstraction mood of the age in Germany.

<sup>53</sup> See n.27 above.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 87. Italics is Kähler's. Jimmy Dunn made much of this in his reading of Kähler.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 88. See also 91.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 82. See also 94. But regarding the 'words of Jesus', Kähler qualifies himself a bit by saying the Gospels don't necessarily give us the exact words of Jesus, but they do provide the correct meaning of what Jesus said. Ibid, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 95.

Spirit. Direct access to what is real triumphs over abstractions that are unreal.<sup>58</sup> Lessing's ditch has been leapt. Stated differently, Kähler locates the dogmatics of the Bible in the real Jesus' teachings, contra theological liberalism that located dogma in later post-Jesus church theologizing. This is how Kähler arrives at a position of trustworthiness of the Bible regarding the dogma and theology preached, because it is faithful to the real Jesus and what he taught. But because liberalism locates dogma and theology in the later church, it sees the New Testament dogma diverging greatly from the historical Jesus and can't be trusted as being faithful to the real Jesus. This sentiment continues to be prevalent in non-evangelical bibliology and resultant Christology.

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<sup>58</sup> But contra Kähler and many others, for an outstanding discussion on abstractionism versus non-abstractionism, the pros and cons of each, and the dangers of going all-in on either one, see Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 169-191.