Biblical Perspectives Magazine Volume 27, Number 17, April 20 to April 26, 2025

From the Historical Jesus to the Jesus of Testimony

The Historical Quest and Christian Faith

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The following is an excerpt from Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, reprinted by permission of the publisher. For the entire work, visit: www.eerdmans.com

For two centuries scholars have been in quest of the historical Jesus. The quest began with the beginnings of modern historical critical study of the New Testament. It has often seemed the most significant task that critical study of the New Testament could pursue. Thousands of scholars have been drawn into the pursuit, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books, scholarly and popular, have been products of the quest. Interest and activity have waxed and waned over the years. Many have pronounced the quest misguided, fruitless, and finished. Others have castigated their predecessors but put their faith in new methods and approaches that they claim will succeed where others failed. Whole eras of western cultural, as well as religious, history have been reflected in the various stages of the quest. Attitudes to the quest, positive, negative, or qualified, have distinguished whole schools of theology.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the quest of the historical Jesus flourishes as never before, especially in North America. The unprecedented size of the industry of New Testament scholarship and the character of the American media both play a part in this. But the fact that the figure of Jesus retains its supremely iconic significance in American culture, as compared with the more secularized societies of Europe and the British isles, is what makes the continuing efforts of historians – rather than theologians or spiritual leaders – to reconstruct the historical reality of Jesus a matter of seemingly endless interest to believers, half-believers, ex-believers, and would-be believers in the Jesus of Christian faith. Is the so-called "historical Jesus" – the Jesus historians may reconstruct as they do any other part of history – the same Jesus as the figure at the center of the Christian religion? This is the question that both excites and disturbs the scholars and the readers of their books alike.

From the beginning of the quest the whole enterprise of attempting to reconstruct the historical figure of Jesus in a way that is allegedly purely historical, free of the concerns of faith and dogma, has been highly problematic for Christian faith and theology. What, after all, does the phrase "the historical Jesus" mean? It is a seriously ambiguous phrase, with at least three meanings. It could mean Jesus

as he really was in his earthly life, in that sense distinguishing the earthly Jesus from the Jesus who, according to Christian faith, now lives and reigns exalted in heaven and will come to bring history to its end. In that sense the historical Jesus is by no means all of the Jesus Christians know and worship, but as a usage that distinguishes Jesus in his earthly life from the exalted Christ the phrase could be unproblematic.

However, the full reality of Jesus as he historically was is not, of course, accessible to us. The world itself could not contain the books that would be needed to record even all that was empirically observable about Jesus, as the closing verse of the Gospel of John puts it. Like any other part of history, the Jesus who lived in first-century Palestine is knowable only through the evidence that has survived. We could therefore us the phrase “the historical Jesus” to mean, not all that Jesus was, but Jesus insofar as his historical reality is accessible to us. But here we reach the crucial methodological problem. For Christian faith this Jesus, the earthly Jesus as we can know him, is the Jesus of the canonical Gospels, Jesus as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recount and portray him. There are difficulties, of course, in the fact that these four accounts of Jesus differ, but there is no doubt that the Jesus of the church’s faith through the centuries has been a Jesus found in these Gospels. That means that Christian faith has trusted these texts. Christian faith has trusted that in these texts we encounter the real Jesus, and it is hard to see how Christian faith and theology can work with a radically distrusting attitude to the Gospels.

Yet everything changes when historians suspect that these texts may be hiding the real Jesus from us, at best because they give us the historical Jesus filtered through the spectacles of early Christian faith, at worst because much of what they tell us is a Jesus constructed by the needs and interests of various groups in the early church. Then that phrase “the historical Jesus” comes to mean, not the Jesus of the Gospels, but the allegedly real Jesus behind the Gospels, the Jesus the historian must reconstruct by subjecting the Gospels to ruthlessly objective (so it is claimed) scrutiny. It is essential to realize that this is not just treating the Gospels as historical evidence. It is the application of a methodological skepticism that must test every aspect of the evidence so that what the historian establishes is not believable because the Gospels tell us it is, but because the historian has independently verified it. The result of such work is inevitably not one historical Jesus, but many. Among current historical Jesuses on offer there is the Jesus of Dominic Crossan, the Jesus of Marcus Borg, the Jesus of N.T. (Tom) Wright, the Jesus of Dale Allison, the Jesus of Gerd Theissen, and many others. The historian’s judgment of the historical value of the Gospels may be minimal, as in some of these cases, or maximal, as in others, but in all cases the result is a Jesus reconstructed by the historian, a Jesus attained by the attempt to go back behind the Gospels and, in effect, to provide an alternative to the Gospels’ constructions of Jesus.

There is a very serious problem here that is obscured by the naïve historical positivism that popular media presentations of these matters promote, not always innocently. All history – meaning all that historians write, all historiography – is an inextricable combination of fact and interpretation, the empirically observable and the intuited or constructed meaning. In the Gospels we have, of course, unambiguously such a combination, and it is this above all that motivates the quest for the Jesus one might find if one could leave aside all the meaning that inheres in each Gospel's story of Jesus. One might, of course, acquire from a skeptical study of the Gospels a meager collection of extremely probable but mere facts that would be of very little interest. That Jesus was crucified may be indubitable but in itself it is of no more significance than the fact that undoubtedly so were thousands of others in his time. The historical Jesus of any of the scholars of the quest is no mere collection of facts, but a figure of significance. Why? If the enterprise is really about going back behind the Evangelists' and the early church's interpretation of Jesus, where does a different interpretation come from? It comes not merely from deconstructing the Gospels but also from reconstructing a Jesus who, as a portrayal of who Jesus really was, can rival the Jesus of the Gospels. We should be under no illusions that, however minimal a Jesus results from the quest, such a historical Jesus is no less a construction than the Jesus of each of the Gospels. Historical work, by its very nature, is always putting two and two together and making five – or twelve or seventeen.

From the perspective of Christian faith and theology we must ask whether the enterprise of reconstructing a historical Jesus behind the Gospels, as it has been pursued through all phases of the quest, can ever substitute for the Gospels themselves as a way of access to the reality of Jesus the man who lived in first-century Palestine. It cannot be said that historical study of Jesus and the Gospels is illegitimate or that it cannot assist our understanding of Jesus. To say that would be, as Wright points out, a modern sort of Docetism.[1] It would be tantamount to denying that Jesus really lived in history that must be, in some degree, accessible to historical study. We need not question that historical study can be relevant to our understanding of Jesus in significant ways. What is in question is whether the reconstruction of a Jesus other than the Jesus of the Gospels, the attempt, in other words, to do all over again what the Evangelists did, though with different methods, critical historical methods, can ever provide the kind of access to the reality of Jesus that Christian faith and theology have always trusted we have in the Gospels. By comparison with the Gospels, any Jesus reconstructed by the quest cannot fail to be reductionist from the perspective of Christian faith and theology.

Here, then, is the dilemma that has always faced Christian theology in the light of the quest of the historical Jesus. Must history and theology part company at this point where Christian faith's investment in history is at its most vital? Must we settle for trusting the Gospels for our access to the Jesus in who Christians

[1] See S. Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

believe, while leaving the historians to construct a historical Jesus based only on what they can verify for themselves by critical historical methods? I think there is a better way forward, a way in which theology and history may meet in the historical Jesus instead of parting company there. In this book I am making a first attempt to lay out some of the evidence and methods for it. Its key category is testimony.

Introducing the Key Category: Eyewitness Testimony

I suggest that we need to recover the sense in which the Gospels are testimony. This does not mean that they are testimony rather than history. It means that the kind of historiography they are is testimony. An irreducible feature of testimony as a form of human utterance is that it asks to be trusted. This need not mean that it askes to be trusted uncritically, but it does mean that testimony should not be treated as credible only to the extent that it can be independently verified. There can be good reasons for trusting or distrusting a witness, but these are precisely reasons for trusting or distrusting. Trusting testimony is not an irrational act of faith that leaves critical rationality aside; it is, on the contrary, the rationally appropriate way of responding to authentic testimony. Gospels understood as testimony are the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus. It is true that a powerful trend in the modern development of critical historical philosophy and method finds trusting testimony a stumbling-block in the way of the historian's autonomous access to truth that she or he can verify independently. But is is also a rather neglected fact that all history, like all knowledge, relies on testimony. In the case of some kinds of historical event this is especially true, indeed obvious. In the last chapter we shall consider a remarkable modern instance, the Holocaust, where testimony is indispensable for adequate historical access to the events. We need to recognize that, historically speaking, testimony is a unique an uniquely valuable means of access to historical reality.

Testimony offers us, I wish to suggest, both a reputable historiographic category for reading the Gospels as history, and also a theological model for understanding the Gospels as the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus. Theologically speaking, the category of testimony enables us to read the Gospels as precisely the kind of text we need in order to recognize the disclosure of God in the history of Jesus. Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognize this theological meaning of the history not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history, in an inextricable coinherence of observable event and perceptible meaning. Testimony is the category that enables us to read the Gospels in a properly historical way and a properly theological way. It is where history and theology meet.

In order to pursue this agenda, we need to give fresh attention to the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus and their relationship to the Gospel

traditions and to the Gospels themselves. In general, I shall be arguing in this book that the Gospel texts are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship. This is what gives the Gospels their character as testimony. They embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it, since the Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses, not removed from them by a long process of anonymous transmission of the traditions. In the case of one of the Gospels, that of John, I conclude, very unfashionably, that an eyewitness wrote it.

This directness of relationship between the eyewitnesses and the Gospel texts requires a quite different picture of the way the Gospel traditions were transmitted from that which most New Testament scholars and students have inherited from the early-twentieth-century movement in New Testament scholarship known as form criticism. Although the methods of form criticism are no longer at the center of the way most scholars approach the issue of the historical Jesus, it has bequeathed one enormously influential legacy. This is the assumption that the traditions about Jesus, his acts and his words, passed through a long process of oral tradition in the early Christian communities and reached the writers of the Gospels only at a late stage of this process. Various different models of the way oral tradition happens – or can be supposed to have happened in those communities - have been canvassed as alternatives to the way the form critics envisaged this. They will be discussed later in this book. But the assumption remains firmly in place that, whatever the form in which the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus first told their stories or repeated Jesus' teachings, a long process of anonymous transmission in the communities intervened between their testimony and the writing of the Gospels. The Gospels embody their testimony only in a rather remote way. Some scholars would stress the conservatism of the process of oral tradition, which preserved the traditions of the eyewitnesses rather faithfully; others would stress the creativity of the communities, which adapted the traditions to their needs and purposes and frequently augmented the traditions with the freshly invented ones. But, however conservative or creative the tradition may have been, the eyewitnesses from whom it originated appear to have nothing significantly to do with it once they have set it going.

There is a very simple and obvious objection to this picture that has often been made but rarely taken very seriously. It was put memorably in 1933 by Vincent Taylor, the scholar who did most to introduce the methods of German form criticism into English-speaking New Testament scholarship. In an often-quoted comment, he wrote that "[2] If the Form-Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection."[3] He went on to point out that many eyewitness participants in the events of the Gospel narratives

[2] N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000) 3-10

[3] V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (2nd edition; London: Macmillan, 1935) 41.

"did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation theyu moved among the young Palestinian communities, and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information."[4] More recently Martin Hengel has insisted, against the form-critical approach, that the "personal link of the Jesus tradition with particular tradents, or more precisely their memory and missionary preaching…is historically undeniable," but was completely neglected by the form-critical notion that "the tradition 'circulated' quite anonymously…in the communities, which are viewed as pure collectives."[5] Part of my intention in this book is to present evidence, much of it not hitherto noticed at all, that makes the "personal link of the Jesus tradition with particular tradents," throughout the period of the transmission of the tradition down to the writing of the Gospels, if not historically undeniable," then at least historically very probable.

The Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount. Mark's Gospel was written well within the lifetime of many of the eyewitnesses, while the other three canonical Gospels were written in the period when living eyewitnesses were becoming scarce, exactly at the point in time when their testimony would perish with them were it not put in writing. This is a highly significant fact, entailed not by unusually early datings of the Gospels but by the generally accepted ones. One lasting effect of form criticism, with its model of anonymous community transmission, has been to give most Gospels scholars an unexamined impression of the period between the events of the Gospel story and the writing of the Gospels as much longer than it realistically was. We have been accustomed to working with models of oral tradition as it passed down through the generations in traditional communities. We imagine the traditions passing through many minds and mouths before they reached the writers of the Gospels. But the period in question is actually that of a relatively (for that period) long lifetime.

Birger Gerhardsson makes this point about the influence of form criticism, which often worked with folklore as a model for the kind of oral tradition that lies behind the Gospels:

> It seems as though parallels from folklore – that is, material extending over centuries and widely different geographical areas – have tempted scholars unconsciously to stretch out the chronological and geographical dimensions of the formation of the early Christian tradition in an unreasonable manner. What is needed here is a more sober approach to history. In the New Testament period the church was not nearly as widespread or as large in numbers as we usually imagine.[6]

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[4] Taylor, *Formation*, 42.

[5] M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (tr. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 2000) 143.

[6] B. Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001) 40.

If, as I shall argue in this book, the period between the “historical” Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths, then the usual ways of thinking of oral tradition are not appropriate at all. Gospel traditions did not, for the most part, circulate anonymously but in the name of the eyewitnesses to whom they were due. Throughout the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, Christians remained interested in and aware of the ways the eyewitnesses themselves told their stories. So, in imagining how the traditions reached the Gospel writers, not oral tradition but eyewitness testimony should be our principal mode.