

# Jesus and His Death

Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and  
Atonement Theory

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# Chapter 1

## The Historical Jesus, the Death of Jesus, Historiography, and Theology

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IN HISTORY, AS ELSEWHERE, FOOLS RUSH IN, AND THE ANGELS MAY PERHAPS  
BE FORGIVEN IF RATHER THAN TREAD IN THOSE TREACHEROUS PATHS THEY  
TREAD UPON THE FOOLS INSTEAD.<sup>1</sup>

~G.R. ELTON

When academics stand before an audience and explain a view of the historical Jesus—in this case how Jesus understood his own death—and when the historical Jesus case is made in the context of a theological discipline and education, the scholar may think he or she is walking on water, but the voices of truth are calling out to the scholar to watch each step. The waters tend to swallow.

Shorn of metaphor, we might say these voices of truth ask three questions: What is history? What is a historical Jesus? What role is that historical Jesus to play in the theological curriculum? Each question needs to be answered, but particularly the third because very few historical Jesus scholars operate in a vacuum. Each makes meaning on the basis of the historical reconstruction. In the context of this monograph the questions are more focused: How did Jesus understand his own death? And, while not the specific focus of this monograph, What role is a reconstruction of how Jesus thought about his death to play in the theological curriculum and, in particular, in how one understands atonement?

Various answers might be proposed now in a preliminary and imaginative way.<sup>2</sup> One might say that Jesus did not think about his death in any profound sense and that, therefore, it was the early Christians who narrated a story that imputed meaning to that death. For some, such a chasm between Christian faith

I am grateful to Paul Copan for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Crowell, 1967), 89.

<sup>2</sup> See ch. 2, under “Some Highlights in the History of Scholarship.”

and what Jesus actually thought would jar the foundations of faith; for others, the chasm might provide space for free thinking. One might, alternatively, argue that Jesus thought of his death in profoundly soteriological terms, even if undeveloped, and that the early Christians unfolded the theology Jesus gave to his impending death. And, however one answers these questions, many think that *whatever* answer one comes to ought to shape one's theology, and some are bold enough to think that the church, or at least the enlightened within the church, ought to revise its understanding of faith accordingly.

As I said, to come to terms with how Jesus understood his own death means we have to come to terms with three questions—about history, about the historical Jesus, and about the role of historical reconstruction in theological meaning-making. We begin with the first question: what is history?

### MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF TAXONOMY<sup>3</sup>

Historical Jesus scholars appropriate a historiography, though very few of them spell their historiography out.<sup>4</sup> Those historiographies can be conveniently labeled postmodernist and modernist, with all sorts of shades within each label as well as a spectrum of how those historiographies have been used by historical Jesus scholars.<sup>5</sup> The most complete historiographies by historical Jesus scholars

<sup>3</sup> For a good survey of the history of historiography, see E. Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). It is not possible here to provide full bibliographies on matters historiographical. The standard journal is *History and Theory*.

The term *historiography*, which usually refers to the “history of historical studies” or (less often) to the “writing of history,” is frequently used in scholarship as shorthand for “philosophy of history.” When I speak of historical Jesus scholars operating with a historiography, I intend that to mean “a philosophically based, whether conscious or not, perception of what can be known about the past and how what can be known is discerned and represented.” Peter Novick’s well-known *That Noble Dream* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8, n. 6 states: “the once respectable word ‘historiology’ has dropped out of just about everybody’s vocabulary, and ‘historiography’ has had to do double duty for both ‘historical science’ [in which I would include the “philosophy of history”] and descriptive accounts of historical writing [i.e., “the history of history”]. Strictly speaking, ‘the objectivity question’ is an *historiological* [concerns the science of history] issue, but all historians speak of it as ‘historiographical.’ Go fight city hall.” If Novick keeps the sword in the scabbard, I shall as well (and stand behind him).

<sup>4</sup> An informed study in this regard is the article by Halvor Moxnes, “The Historical Jesus,” *BTB* 28 (1999): 135–49. He studies the historiography, with reference to “master narratives,” of J.P. Meier, E.P. Sanders, R.A. Horsley, J.D. Crossan, and B.J. Malina. For my own survey of trends in Jesus studies, see “Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies* (ed. S. McKnight and G.R. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 149–76. See the recently published D.L. Denton Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies* (JSNTSSup 262; London: T&T Clark, 2004). This study was unfortunately not available to me during my research, but his emphasis on the role of holism and the place of narrative (or story) in historiography are most welcome and accord with the direction of my own understanding.

are those of N.T. Wright in the first two volumes of his multivolume series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*,<sup>6</sup> and the recent introduction by James D.G. Dunn in his *Jesus Remembered*.<sup>7</sup> While other studies are intensely informed at the level of philosophical discussion and technical method—one thinks of B.F. Meyer, J.P. Meier, J.D. Crossan, and Dale Allison,<sup>8</sup>—few are actually proposing a historiography as have Wright and Dunn. The reason I say this about Wright and Dunn (with reservations, of course), will become clear in our survey of postmodernist and modernist historiography, but in brief it is this: Wright proposes a plausible Jewish context and a plausible story for what Jesus was all about, while Dunn proposes a plausible method (oral traditioning) as the most likely process out of which the Jesus traditions grew and, thereby, Dunn is redefining what “authentic” means.<sup>9</sup> Both Wright and Dunn have put forth theories that are and will continue to reshape studies in the historical Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> A good textbook on how to do history is M. Howell and W. Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 29–144. The historiography of Wright was then worked out in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (*Christian Origins and the Question of God 2*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 11–336. Dunn’s book is a landmark when it comes to the exploitation of “oral theory” for understanding the Jesus traditions, though there is debate on how he understands that oral tradition and just how memory works. For his most recent statement, see Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). On oral tradition, see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); T.C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency* (WUNT 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Jan./Feb. 2005). See the recent responses to Dunn in B. Holmberg, “Questions of Method in James Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 445–57; S. Byrskog, “A New Perspective on the Jesus Tradition: Reflections on James D.G. Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 459–71; and Dunn’s response: “On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 473–87.

<sup>8</sup> B.F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 76–110, who famously adapted Bernard Lonergan’s studies for historical Jesus scholarship; see also B.F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 17; Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989); *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical [Glazier], 1994); J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (3 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991–2001), 1.1–201; J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); on Crossan’s method, one must see the critical evaluation of D.C. Allison, Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 10–33.

<sup>9</sup> One might say that there are three strands of historiography among historical Jesus scholars whose works will be cited when appropriate: (1) those of a modernist bent include scholars as diverse as N. Perrin, J.P. Meier, E.P. Sanders, B.D. Chilton, and M. Borg, even though their theologies differ wildly; (2) those of a postmodernist bent include E. Schüssler Fiorenza and perhaps James D.G. Dunn; and (3) those of a mediating line include N.T. Wright and more likely Dunn (his historiographical epistemology is chastened modernism rather than consistently postmodern). The critical separation occurs over the relation of Subject (historian) and Object (Jesus/Gospels/ancient evidence). The closer one gets to the Subject dominating the discourse, the closer one gets to the

## POSTMODERNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Whatever postmodernism has going for it or against it, it has the confidence that when it comes to the matter of historiography it alone has the goose by the neck. Take, for example, Keith Jenkins, the United Kingdom's most confident postmodernist historiographer and (as is sometimes said of the radicals) "boadeconstructor." Jenkins defines postmodernism as the "era of the aporia"; that postmodernism is a stance taken by *le tout intelligentsia*.<sup>10</sup> That is,

By aporia I mean that this is an era when all the decisions we take—political, ethical, moral, interpretive, representational, etc., are ultimately undecidable (aporetic). That our chosen ways of seeing things lack foundations and that, as far as a discourse like history is concerned, it is essentially to be thought of as an aesthetic—a shaping, figuring discourse—and not as an objective, true, or foundational epistemology.<sup>11</sup>

And:

There are not—and nor have there ever been—any "real" foundations of the kind alleged to underpin the experiment of the modern; that we now just have to understand that we live amidst social formations which have no legitimising ontological or epistemological or ethical grounds for our beliefs or actions beyond the status of an ultimately self-referencing (rhetorical) conversation.<sup>12</sup>

Jenkins at times fawns over the earlier Hayden White, even though White isn't so antifoundationalist.<sup>13</sup> White, America's leading postmodernist (or, more

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postmodernist enterprise. The closer one gets to seeing the Object as capable of speaking for itself, simply by uncovering the earliest original material, as is clearly the case with J.P. Meier, the closer one is to the modernist enterprise.

<sup>10</sup> A potent critique of Keith Jenkins and other postmodernists can be found in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (rev. ed.; London: Granta, 2000). See also G. Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2004); K. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2000), whose rhetoric rivals Jenkins. There is no embracing definition of postmodernism, and what I mean by postmodernist historiography essentially can be narrowed down to Jenkins himself. There is not space here to develop the spectrum of postmodernist historiographies. On this, see K. Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, *Refiguring History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 71 (Introduction, n. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, *On "What is History?"* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins also utilizes Richard Rorty at a deep level. See Jenkins' *On "What is History?"* 97–133. While I'm only loosely conversant with Rorty, I am aware that Jenkins relies on the "linguistic turn" of Rorty but fails in his most recent book (*Refiguring History*) substantially to engage Rorty's later "pragmatist turn" and, even more recently, his "romantic polytheism turn," both of which put strain on Rorty's earlier linguistic turn and, therefore, on the cogency of Jenkins' appeal to Rorty. See R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). A summary can be found in J. Boffetti, "How Richard Rorty Found Religion," *First Things* 143 (2004): 24–30. See also R. Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square," *JRE* 31 (2003): 141–49. According to the English philosopher Bernard Williams, Rorty's philosophical pragmatism was running on

accurately, structuralist) historiographer,<sup>14</sup> essentially claims that all history writing is a narrative created in the head of the historian out of discrete facts from the past.<sup>15</sup> His fundamental work *Metahistory* provided a taxonomy of the sorts of narrative games historians play. As a result, scholars today often speak of the linguistic turn in historiography, a radical reshaping of the discipline developed by postmodernists under the influence of the logocentrism of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty.

Everything a historian writes, it is claimed (rather objectively) by those like White and Jenkins, is emplotted in a narrative—and it is the narrative that matters in that it shapes the content. There is in that narrative, as White expresses it, “an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena.”<sup>16</sup> The narrative one historian tells differs from the narrative another historian tells because they are telling different stories—as opposed to one story being less accurate as it corresponds to, or better yet coheres with, the “facts.” Therefore, history is all rhetoric, all discourse, all language, and in effect all autobiography.<sup>17</sup> History is, after all, nothing but historiography, the history of histories and the history of historians.

The impact of this theory is at times quixotic. History, the postmodernist says, is the study of ancient texts, not the ancient past; it is, in other terms, *phenomenalism* (rather than *critical realism*, about which we will have more to say below). In effect, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Christianity and Classical Culture* (to pick an egregious example) are simply different readings of phenomena, but neither is right, neither is wrong. Any search for the “best explanation” is removed from the map.<sup>18</sup>

Of a less extreme nature and whose work will not be explored in detail here, F.R. Ankersmit’s recent study *Historical Representation* marks a singular advance on Hayden White in underscoring and developing what it means to provide a *narrative* about the past. Recognizing the inevitability of the historian’s need to turn discoveries into narrative, Ankersmit finds *representation* to be the most

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empty and led to changes: see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 59.

<sup>14</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and, with some clear modification, *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> See Jenkins, *Re-thinking History; On “What is History?”; Why History?* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” in his *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>17</sup> For another recent study along this line, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation (Cultural Memory in the Present)*; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> On this, see P. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (2d ed.; International Library of Philosophy; London: Routledge, 2002).



plausible term for what is done, and he explores the significance of that term as the key factor involved in historical undertakings. Representations are linguistic “things” and they do not “refer to” so much as they are “about” the past.<sup>19</sup> A representation offers to the reading public a metaphor.<sup>20</sup> The discipline of history writing, of providing a re-presentation, is about subjectivity and aesthetics.<sup>21</sup> Whatever representation a historian puts forward is a proposal, and little more than that. It is not that historians build upon one another to construct an edifice of certain knowledge.

Hence, history as a cathedral to which each historian contributes a few bricks for the greater glory of common effort has given way to history as a metropolis in which everybody goes their own way and minds their own business without caring much about what others do.<sup>22</sup>

Inevitably, postmodernist historians like Jenkins and Ankersmit have their share of critics.

A leading historiography all dressed up in the attire of a previous generation and who calls out from the starboard side of this debate, Sir Geoffrey Elton, calls the postmodernist approach to history the “ultimate heresy” and “frivolous nihilism.”<sup>23</sup> A modernist historiographer<sup>24</sup> like Elton, Jenkins says in his accusing manner, thinks he is getting at the “facts” and “finding the truth,” but in effect that sort of history can be turned on its head, as deconstructionists gleefully do, to see little but the historian’s own narrative tale. As Richard Evans, who stands near on the starboard side Elton, sums it up:

The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in faithful fashion but rather, like the novelist, only gives the appearance of doing so.<sup>25</sup>

Jenkins throws down the gauntlet more than once: when speaking of (upper case) History, he says, “I mean, nobody really believes in that particular fantasy

<sup>19</sup> Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Another helpful study of history as the exploration of mental metaphors is that of J.L. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 75–103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> G.R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins defines modernism as follows: “It is a general failure . . . of the attempt, from around the eighteenth century in Europe, to bring about through the application of reason, science and technology, a level of personal and social wellbeing within social formations which, legislating for an increasingly generous emancipation of their citizens/subjects, we might characterise by saying that they were trying, at best, to become ‘human rights communities’” (*On “What is History?”* 6).

<sup>25</sup> R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 98. Another staunch response to the postmodernist trend in historiography can be found in Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old*, who is more concerned with the predominance of social history over political history. But, for her take on postmodernist historiography, see pp. 15–30.

any more” and when he speaks of (lower case) history, he says that view “is now unsustainable.”<sup>26</sup> St. Paul had his thorn in the flesh and we, I’m prone to say, have the postmodernists. They keep us on our knees. Or, on our heels.

Roughly speaking, “History” pertains to macroscopic visions of history—like the Bible, like Augustine, Hegel, and Marx (an odd box of chocolates, to be sure), while “history” pertains to the microscopic attempts to shed light on smaller corners of real people in the real past. Except that there are some who believe the former, including many historical Jesus scholars—who have the confidence (and this is no strike against him), like Marcus Borg, to think that what they find in the past about Jesus has historic significance for understanding both history and life.<sup>27</sup> In fact, nearly every historical Jesus scholar operates at least with a lower-case history, and many with an upper-case sense of History.

We must be careful at this point because postmodernism is often inaccurately caricatured. It is not that there is no past and no attempt at description of that past. For postmodernist historiographers like Jenkins, there is indeed a past, a present, and a future. That past can be characterized as containing “facts,” that is existential facts or better yet discrete facts. And, in contrast to what some Gospel Jesus scholars now claim, the historian can at times determine those facts or find them in spite of their present location within narratives (like the Gospels). However, those facts are discrete, according to the postmodernist, in that they are unrelated, uninterpreted, and meaningless in and of themselves. The facts are a proliferated, disparate lot.

Which means that whenever such a proliferation and dispersal is disciplined into some specific unity, into some specific sort of significance [that is a historical

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 8, 9.

<sup>27</sup> See the trajectory shaped in Marc Borg’s writings by his *Jesus, A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) to his most recent *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2003).

Martin Kähler laid down the maxim that Christian faith could not be based on the results of historians. Historians themselves mock his claim. Nearly every historical Jesus scholar I know believes in the portrait of Jesus he or she has painted on the canvas after historical research. Nor, so I think, can Kähler sustain the claim that “historical” knowledge and “theological” or “systematic” knowledge are epistemologically that different. Faith is inevitably shaped by what one knows and is not as certain as Kähler would like, and what one knows is shaped by one’s historiography and epistemology. In other words, both faith and historical knowledge are shaped by a probabilistic epistemology at some level. On this, see Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (ed. and trans. C.E. Braaten, 1896; rpr. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

While it is wise to contend that the church’s faith is not to shift every time a new historical Jesus study is offered, it is unwise to think that this is simply an epistemological issue. Put slightly differently, the church’s faith is rooted in the New Testament and in the historic creeds, not in the shifting results of scholars; but that knowledge of the NT and the creeds contains a historiography and a “narrative” in the mind of every individual believer. The reason L.T. Johnson’s *The Real Jesus* struck a nerve with Christian historical Jesus scholars is because he contended for a creedal faith, even if he mistakenly appealed to a Kähler-like foundation for such a contention. See *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996).

narrative] . . . then that unity is not, and cannot be, one which has arisen from the dispersed facts themselves; is not one which has arisen from the sources, but is a unity which is and can only be logically derived from outside these things—from theory; only theory can give history any unity of significance . . . theory ultimately reasserts itself as the inescapable determinant of meaning.<sup>28</sup>

Historians can make statements about these dispersed (or discrete, or existential, or proliferated) facts, and they can also connect them chronologically to form a chronicle, but that is not what history really is. History is the spinning of a narrative out of discrete facts in order to ascertain meaning. Importantly for the postmodernist historian, to discover facts is not to discover meaning. Meaning is created by the historian, who tells a narrative as a piece of aesthetics. Hayden White, who can be called back to the deck on this very question, sees history as a form of literature and not a form of science.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Jenkins claims,

we [all of us, so it seems] recognise that there never has been, and there never will be, any such thing as a past which is expressive of some sort of essence, whilst the idea that the proper study of history is actually “own-sakism” is recognised as just the mystifying way in which a bourgeoisie conveniently articulates its own interests as if they belonged to the past itself. . . . Consequently the whole “modernist” History/history ensemble now appears as a self-referential, problematic expression of “interests,” an ideological-interpretive discourse without any “real” access to the past as such; unable to engage in any dialogue with “reality.” In fact, “history” now appears to be just one more “expression” in a world of postmodern expressions: which of course is what it is.

... modernist renditions are now naïve: their historical moment has passed.

Saying true things about the past at the level of the statement is easy—anybody can do that—but saying the right things, getting the picture straight, that is not only another story but an impossible one: you can always get another picture, you can always get another context.

... then precisely insofar as the narrative endows real events with the kind of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature, we are justified in regarding such a construct as an allegory.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, history as a discourse is not an epistemology.

Bingo! There you have it: a postmodernist understanding (with neo-Marxism as its tarragon) of what historical Jesus scholars are actually—unbe-

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 82–83.

<sup>29</sup> See White, *Metahistory*.

<sup>30</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 9, 10, 21, 24. “Own-sakism” is a critique of Sir G.R. Elton, who will be examined below.

knownst to them—doing: they are simply asserting their power and ideology through an aesthetic presentation about Jesus. Since postmodernism is the only game in town, it is the game historical Jesus scholars are playing. It would not be unfair, though it would be edgy, to describe postmodernist historiography as *semiotic fascism*. Words, and only words, rule—totally. Their own game of words is itself, ironically, a metanarrative.

Which view shows us that just about anything is possible in the world of scholarship.

Historical Jesus scholarship becomes, in Jenkins' categories, bourgeois—and it is the proletariat (read: postmodernist historiographers) that now runs the game. The classical studies of Joachim Jeremias, Geza Vermes, Ben Meyer, E.P. Sanders, M. Borg, J.P. Meier, J.D. Crossan, N.T. Wright, B.D. Chilton, and James D.G. Dunn turn out, in this neo-Marxist and linguistic turn, to be nothing but ideologies, nothing but personal expressions of power. They simply emplot the events or existential facts about Jesus in a narrative, and it is the narrative that determines which facts are to be emplotted. Each narrative is a game of power, played by the author and his intended audience. And, what makes one presentation of Jesus “true” and another “not true” or “less than true” is that the true one is connected to persons in power while the not true or less than true ones are not. Truth, then, is little more than the voice of privilege.<sup>31</sup> It might be easy for one historical Jesus scholar to make this accusation against another, but it is harder to admit that one's accusation itself is only the same game of power.

As Jenkins puts it in a way that “goes all the way down” to the bottom of the soul,

Postmodern historians think that human beings can live ironic, reflexive, historicised lives, without the magic, incantations, mythologisations and mystifications spun by certainist historians from across the board in both upper and lower cases. Postmodern historians see their own histories as being made not for “the past itself” but for themselves and for people whom they like (for when, they ask, was that ever not the case?).<sup>32</sup>

This is a bitter pill to swallow for most of us, and it is not the sort of thing often heard in historical Jesus scholarship, though some theologians have banged this drum for a few decades. Are they not, as the philosopher Bernard Williams suggests, “pecking into dust the only tree that will support them” when they abandon any goal of objectivity, any sense of truth having some sense of correspondence or coherence, and of texts having the intention of communicating?<sup>33</sup> In the coherency theory of truth, one could say that one's “re-presenta-

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, *On “What is History?”* 38–39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 19. See below, under “Historical Jesus Studies and the Theological Discipline.”

tion” *characterizes* truth even if it does not *constitute* that truth.<sup>34</sup> But, as Jenkins counsels us, because we can’t get to the truth, sometimes we just have to take our medicine, or swallow the dust, and hope to get better—which would mean we would need to stop thinking that what we are doing is what we are really doing, and start recognizing that we are nothing but ideologues.

This postmodern critique of historical scholarship, it needs to be recognized, is not the old, standard pointing of fingers within historical Jesus scholarship. This is not E.P. Sanders criticizing Joachim Jeremias for having a Lutheran gospel grid through which he forces Jesus; nor is this Marc Borg arguing that previous scholars have not sufficiently recognized the religious genius of Jesus; nor is this N.T. Wright claiming that previous scholars have not sufficiently recognized the profound grasp Jesus had on Israel’s story; nor is this Jimmy Dunn contending that previous scholars have not recognized the significance of oral traditions.

No, what Jenkins is accusing us of is far more profound, and it closes the books on nearly every historical Jesus study ever done. He is saying that we are not finding the “real” Jesus behind the texts, the rediscovery of whom sheds light both on the real Jesus and a more genuine and authentic and historical faith. He is arguing that we are simply fooling ourselves: what we think we are doing is not what we are doing. We are not finding Jesus back there, hidden for all these years by the church and others. What we are “finding” is nothing; we are “imposing” pleasing narratives about our own ideologies in order to assert our own power. We impose our power in the form of rhetoric about Jesus. Historical Jesus scholars don’t have a goose by the neck, after all; instead, they have a mirror by the top and they are looking at themselves. History, he is saying, is not the past. History is a narrative using discrete facts about the past. This sort of history is more imagined than it is found. The past remains there, discoverable in its historiographical representations (like the Gospels), but meaningless until it is spun into a narrative. History makes discoverable and discrete and existential facts meaningful; but the meaning one finds is not what happened, not the past itself, but a narrative spun in the mind of the historian.

Sometimes, of course, we recognize that historical Jesus scholars have such a heavy agenda that any notion of objectivity (which Jenkins excoriates) is tossed into the winds, but I’ve not yet met many who think they ought to abandon objectivity and instead simply tell a narrative of their own choosing, gathering bits and bobs of discrete facts and spinning them into a metanarrative of meaning. At least not at the conscious, intentional level. It ought also to be noted that the claim that there is no objectivity is ultimately a claim for an alternative objectivity rather than an alternative to objectivity.

Not all go “all the way down” with Jenkins. For instance, a standard textbook in the United States for history classes is that of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt,

<sup>34</sup> I owe this observation to Paul Copan.

and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*.<sup>35</sup> While they appreciate and learn from the postmodernist perspective that history is created in the mind rather than a simple discovery of the past and that history writing shapes culture, their concern is to present a chastened postmodernist or, as I interpret them, an enlightened modernist perspective.<sup>36</sup> However we classify them, the authors mediate the voices—they are neither radical postmodernists nor classical modernists. In fact, they offer a stunning critique of classical modernism in their study of the “heroic model of science.”<sup>37</sup> They can provide in this chapter a bridge to the modernist agenda in historiography.

For instance, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob (AHJ) think the historian can find truth. Thus, in commenting on the discovery that science itself was historically conditioned and can be called to account as a historicist undertaking, AHJ observe: “Science can be historically and socially framed *and still be true*.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, appealing to the value of realism, AHJ observe that “realism permits historians to aim language *at things outside themselves*.”<sup>39</sup> The age-old quest for objectivity, disinterestedness, and distance in an effort to let the ancient world speak has led to renewed appreciations of what objectivity really is, and AHJ build on the work of E.H. Carr and approach critical realism (see below the following section on modernist historiography) when they say that:

We have redefined historical objectivity as an interactive relationship between an inquiring subject and an external object. Validation in this definition comes from persuasion more than proof, *but without proof there is not historical writing of any worth*.<sup>40</sup>

And, this “persuasion” is defined as the result (progress?) of scholarly discussion:

Objectivity is not a stance arrived at by sheer willpower, nor is it the way most people, most of the time, make their daily inquiries. Instead it is the result of the clash of social interests, ideologies, and social conventions within the framework of object-oriented and disciplined knowledge seeking.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994) [= AHJ]. The three are historians (at the time of printing) at UCLA. Both Moxnes and Dunn use the study of these three historians in their attempts to come to terms with a more responsible historiography.

<sup>36</sup> At times this study recalls E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures [January–March 1961]; New York: Knopf, 1962; 2d ed. 1987), especially in how the authors articulate what “objectivity” is (see pp. 241–70). For example, this comment dissociates the authors from Jenkins: “Every time people go down the relativist road, the path darkens and the light recedes from the tunnel” (192). In fact, they say, “In the final analysis, then, there can be no postmodern history” (237).

<sup>37</sup> AHJ, *Telling the Truth about History*, 15–125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 171 (italics added).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251 (italics added).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 261 (italics added).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

As if to counter the work of Jenkins before his time, AHJ say,

What this book insists upon is the human capacity to discriminate between false and faithful representations of past reality and, beyond that, to articulate standards which help both practitioners and readers to make such discriminations.<sup>42</sup>

It is unfair to AHJ to cut them off at this point, but space forbids a lengthy analysis of their important place in the discipline. Yet, one of their comments transcends our space concerns, a comment that best expresses what history is all about: “The human intellect demands accuracy while the soul craves meaning.”<sup>43</sup>

*(MORE OR LESS) MODERNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY*

Keith Jenkins remonstrates with two historians whose books have shaped the modern discussion of historiography: the works of E.H. Carr<sup>44</sup> and G.R. Elton.<sup>45</sup> If Carr, in his soft Marxist *modus operandi*, contends that a fact becomes history only when it is absorbed into a meaningful history by a historian, Elton represents pure modernism: history is the attempt to find out what happened and why *for its own sake*, in its own context, in its own terms, and its own meaning.<sup>46</sup> Carr thinks what matters is how we can use the past to predict and shape the future, while Elton thinks what matters is not how something can be used but what it was really like—to use the famous Rankean expression, *blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, (“simply to show, how it really [or, essentially] happened”).<sup>47</sup> While both Carr and Elton are Rankean to one degree or another, Elton is the post-Rankean Ranke. And Carr and Elton did not get along, famously.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>44</sup> Carr, *What is History?* See also J. Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity* (New York: Verso, 1999); M. Cox, ed., *E.H. Carr* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Elton, *Practice of History; Return to Essentials*. Teachers know that one of the most proven ways to get students to learn is to present polar opposites so that students can find their own way. This, I suppose, is why Carr and Elton have proven so popular (though more modern-day historians currently are Marxist, and more inclined toward Carr than toward Elton). I suspect Jenkins and Evans can replace Carr and Elton as dialectical opposites.

<sup>46</sup> Thus, Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 19: “Thus, historians are never in a position—and should never imagine themselves as being in a position—to read a source without attention to both the historical and historiographical contexts that gave it meaning.”

<sup>47</sup> L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen and germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Sämtliche Werke 33/34; 2d ed.; Leipzig: Duncker & Humboldt, 1874), preface to 1st edition, vii (*apud* G. Theissen and D. Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* [trans. M.E. Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 43). For years I have said *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, while many omit the *ist*. I am happy to see in Theissen and Winter a correct citation.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Elton, *Practice of History*, 12–22. Carr, who was a Marxist, gets this insult from Elton: “Marxism . . . [is] a truly remarkable achievement of scientific insight and ill-controlled speculation” (37).

To play with the image we have already used, if Jenkins claims that both Carr and (especially) Elton are not holding the goose by the neck but a mirror instead, Elton has a counter. The modernist will claim that Jenkins, by admitting that his own ideology shapes his history, is the one with a mirror in his hands and that the goose can be had—if one has strong enough hands. In addition, the modernist historiographer is ashamed that Jenkins is proud of his own stance. Elton and his ilk will lay claim to the fact that it is they who have the goose by the neck, even if at times they are humble enough to admit their grip is tenuous, and at times the goose escapes. But at least, Elton would say, the modernist historian is interested in the goose of what remains from the past and not the mirror of a present ideology.

Jenkins thinks Elton's methodology is as passé as drinking tea from one's saucer, while Elton thinks Jenkins is cracked—cup and saucer. Jenkins may claim that postmodernism is no longer an option for historians but is instead the fate and condition of all who are at work at all time, but Elton (were he still alive) would simply say . . . perhaps I should use Elton's own words that get at this with his own savage wit:

No one reads or writes history in a fit of total absentmindedness, though a fair amount of history has been written by people whose minds seem in part to have been on other things.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, Elton would think Jenkins has his mind on other things (and his eyes on a mirror), while Elton thinks he's got his own hand around the goose's neck and Jenkins' neck (the mirror was left at home as he trotted off to the library).

Whether the goose image is useful or not, the majority of historical Jesus scholarship can be categorized as Rankean, post-Rankean, *and* modernist. That is, they are concerned with finding facts, discovering what those facts meant at their time and in their original context, and then setting out an interpretation of those facts in a way that best corresponds to the originals. Perhaps the most representative modernist historians in early Christian studies (with footnote referencing omitted) would be scholars like Martin Hengel, E.P. Sanders, J.P. Meier, Richard Bauckham, and David Aune.

They aim to be scientific—hence preoccupied with method and neutrality and objectivity, and they breathe the air of the hopeful—hence convinced that proper methods, intelligence, and the suppression of one's own views can lead to an ever enlarging knowledge base about the past and its value for the present and future. This is a modernist historiography at work, though I'm not so sure most historical Jesus scholars are as conscious of this as perhaps they ought to be. What modernist historians assume is that language is not simply self-referential but is also other-referential.

<sup>49</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 39.



It would be unfair, however, to historical Jesus scholarship to suggest that historical Jesus scholars are simply working out the historiography of either Carr or Elton. In fact, the historiography of historical Jesus scholars is eclectic and often unconscious or uninformed of a specific historiography. Because historical Jesus scholarship is eclectic, we need to mention four other historiographers whose views come into play when one discusses the historiography of historical Jesus scholarship: Marc Bloch,<sup>50</sup> Jacques Le Goff,<sup>51</sup> Richard J. Evans,<sup>52</sup> and John Lewis Gaddis.<sup>53</sup> But, because historical Jesus scholarship seems largely unconscious of its historiography, or at least unwilling to trot out its essential features, it is important for us to bring to the surface some of these features.

If we care about the place of the historical Jesus in the theological curriculum, it becomes fundamentally important for us to become aware of what we are doing when we pursue the historical Jesus. Because, so it seems to me, most historical Jesus scholars are fundamentally Eltonian, I will focus on Elton's work.<sup>54</sup>

Sir Geoffrey Elton is best understood if we begin with these two claims:

Historical method is no more than a recognized and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of that past, and so far as possible their true meaning and interrelation, the whole governed by the first principle of historical understanding, namely that the past must be studied in its own right, for its own sake, and on its own terms. . . . Its fundamental principles are only two, and they may be expressed as questions, thus: exactly what evidence is there, and exactly what does it mean? Knowledge of all the sources, and competent criticism of them—these are the basic requirements of a reliable historiography.

<sup>50</sup> M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (trans. P. Putnam; New York: Vintage, 1953). This book is a draft of a volume that was never completed; Bloch was assassinated by the Third Reich on 16 June 1944, along with twenty-six others. The book has enjoyed enormous popularity.

<sup>51</sup> A member of the French *Annales* school with its social-scientific and objective approach, and following the lead of Marc Bloch, Jacques Le Goff is a major medievalist, and I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Susan Rabe, for introducing me to Le Goff. See his *History and Memory* (trans. S. Rendall and E. Claman; European Perspectives; New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). This study is a collection of major articles originally translated into Italian for R. Romano, ed., *Enciclopedia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977–1982).

<sup>52</sup> Closer to Elton than to Carr, but a mediating voice between them nonetheless, is Richard J. Evans' *In Defence of History*. His study is an elegantly written masterpiece of chastened modernist historiography. The decision to respond to his many, mostly postmodernist critics wounds the elegance of the book by this modern German history scholar.

<sup>53</sup> Standing on the shoulders of E.H. Carr, John Lewis Gaddis, an American historian of the Cold War period, gave a series of lectures at the University of Oxford as the George Eastman Visiting Professor at Balliol. They follow the lines set out by Carr and, like Carr, Gaddis writes masterfully. See his *Landscape of History*.

<sup>54</sup> For Jenkins' relentless critique of Elton, see Jenkins, *On "What is History?"* 64–96.

The historian must not go against the first conditions of his calling: his knowledge of the past is governed by the evidence of that past, and that evidence must be criticized and interpreted by the canons of historical scholarship.<sup>55</sup>

Never mind that Elton's sharp pen has what amounts to two "firsts": What does he mean by "evidence"?

Evidence is the surviving deposit of an historical event; in order to rediscover the event, the historian must read not only with the analytical eye of the investigator but also with the comprehensive eye of the story-teller.<sup>56</sup>

The historian, so claims the modernist historian G.R. Elton, can be objective:

In the process of learning, he already constructs, and in so far as the first is governed by the integrity imposed by the evidence the second flows from that evidence rather than from the historian's mind. However, it is he who uses the evidence: he chooses, arranges, interprets. As a researcher, he has his defences; he must see whether as a writer he can escape *the relativism of his personality*.<sup>57</sup>

In another context, Elton puts it with his usual flair for the dramatic:

Historians' personalities and private views are a fact of life, like the weather; and like the weather they are not really worth worrying about as much as in practice they are worried over. They cannot be eliminated, nor should they be. The historian who thinks that he has removed himself from his work is almost certainly mistaken; what in fact he is likely to have proved is the possession of a colourless personality which renders his work not sovereignly impartial but merely dull.<sup>58</sup>

He can't stop with this, so he continues:

But though dullness is no virtue, neither is self-conscious flamboyance. The historian need not try either to eliminate or to intrude himself; let him stick to the writing of history and forget the importance of his psyche. It will be there all right and will no doubt be served by his labours, but really it matters less to the result than critics lament or friends acclaim, and it matters a great deal less than does his intellect.

Which is not to say that the historian does not hop the rails of objectivity and reveal that he would rather continue alone and chase a different path. For Elton, awareness of this bias is critical in keeping the historian on the rails.

<sup>55</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 65, 35.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. Italics are mine. On "objectivity," see Evans, *In Defence of History*, 224–53; Novick, *That Noble Dream*; Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 111–28; Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 111–15.

<sup>58</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 105.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

The point is rather that whatever piece of the past the historian reconstructs must, to be present to the mind, achieve a shape of beginning and end, of cause and effect, of meaning and intent. If, as he ought to be, the historian is in addition an artist, a man wishing to create (in words) a thing of interest and beauty, the constructive element in the process can become overpowering; and if political motives supervene it becomes really dangerous.<sup>59</sup>

A nasty war has taken place between the historian and the social scientist over whether or not we focus on individuals shaping history or on history shaping, because it determines, individuals. A leading light in this discussion was Isaiah Berlin, both in his *Historical Inevitability*, wherein he fought against determinism of all kinds in the name of a humane, free-will-oriented and even moralistic historiography, and in his inimitable essay on Leo Tolstoy's historiography, "The Hedgehog and the Fox."<sup>60</sup> But Elton, building on that scholarship, cut through the brush (because he, too, was a hedgehog) with this:

History does not exist without people, and whatever is described happens through and to people. Therefore let us talk about people, by all means imposing categories on them and abstracting generalizations from them, but not about large miasmatic clouds like forces or busy little gnomes like trends.<sup>61</sup>

Elton has been attacked, especially of late by the postmodernists, and Elton's work responds with an only slightly chastened claim:

Reality has to be rediscovered and described on the basis of knowledge which is invariably incomplete, often highly ambiguous, and cannot be enlarged once all the relevant survivals have been studied, all of which demands constant decisions based on choice among the possibilities . . . [but] the present must be kept out of the past . . . That partial and uneven evidence must be read in the context of the day that produced it . . . [because] we must study the past for its own sake and guided by its own thoughts and practices.<sup>62</sup>

And, as he ends chapter 1 of his classic textbook: *Omnia veritas*.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> I. Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (Auguste Comte Memorial Trust Lecture 1 [12 May 1953]; London: Oxford University Press, 1954); "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (ed. H. Hardy and R. Hausheer; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 436–98. For an informative and at times humorous setting of Berlin's historiography in context, see M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 203–7.

<sup>61</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Elton, *Return to Essentials*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Elton, *Practice of History*, 50. On p. 51 he states that we are to recognize "that inability to know all the truth is not the same thing as total inability to know the truth."

*WHAT IS HISTORY?*

There is one fundamental issue in all philosophical discussions of historiography today: the relation of the Subject to the Object,<sup>64</sup> of the historian to what that historian wants to study—in our case, Jesus of Nazareth and the historical relics that survive about him, his world, and how he understood his own death. If the postmodernist, someone like Jenkins, wants to usurp the Object with the Subject by contending that history is narrative, history is rhetoric, and history is ideology, the modernist wants to blanket the Subject and find the Object, pure and simple and untouched, and build on that disinterested knowledge for a better world.

Let this be said before we go further: what the modernist wants to do cannot be achieved in its pure form. The postmodernists have made this clear. Unfortunately, too often they make this point with rhetoric and logic and not specific examples gleaned from historical spadework—the sort of examples that compel agreement by historians.<sup>65</sup> In our field, it is maddeningly clear that what one group sees as progress (e.g., the Crossan approach) is unacceptable to another group (e.g., the Allison approach). *Progress*, then, is a tricky term when it comes to historical research laden with meaning—as is historical Jesus study.

Back to the issue of the relationship of the Subject and the Object. Even before the postmodernists, E.H. Carr tossed blocks of ice on the heat of claimed neutrality and objectivity of the modernist, empiricist history, saying that such a day is now over.

This [era of empiricist historiography] was the age of innocence, and historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history. Since then, we have known Sin and experienced a Fall; and those historians who today pretend to dispense with a philosophy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb.

Study the historian before you begin to study the facts. . . . When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog.

Two books cannot be written by the same historian.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Few have discussed, so far as I know, the claim of Elton that the subject matter of history is more objective than that of the natural sciences because the material is independent and has what he calls a “dead reality” (p. 53). See Elton, *Practice of History*, 51–58.

<sup>65</sup> A weakness in the approach of Keith Jenkins is his lack of examples from historical work. This, in part, is what Sir Geoffrey Elton despised: Elton listened only to those who were doing actual historical work (e.g., Elton, *Return to Essentials*, 3–26, 34). At the level of style and example, the studies of Richard J. Evans and John Lewis Gaddis carry the day.

<sup>66</sup> Carr, *What is History?* 21, 26, 52.

But let this also be said before we go further: neither is the bold claim of Jenkins tenable. We cannot completely swallow the Object in our subjectivity. We remain differentiated ego masses—and can do nothing about it. This is why the “critical realism” of Ben F. Meyer, a historical Jesus scholar, has become so important to historical Jesus scholarship.<sup>67</sup> Or, in the words of AHJ, a “practical realism.”<sup>68</sup> Or, as stated by Dunn,

To conceive the hermeneutical process as an infinitely regressive intertextuality is a counsel of despair which quickly reduces all meaningful communication to impossibility and all communication to a game of “trivial pursuit.”<sup>69</sup>

So what then is history? And, for our purposes, what kind of history is the historical Jesus scholar doing? First, history begins with “facts” that survive from the past as evidence (facts constituent of the Object).<sup>70</sup> This evidence confronts the Subject (observer),<sup>71</sup> which facts, even if one follows the dynamic flow of the French phenomenologist Michel Henry on life, time and truth,<sup>72</sup> can be captured as existential facts—a point permitted even by the postmodernist Keith Jenkins. The Subject does not completely swallow up the Object, and when it is claimed that it does, we are seeing what Richard Evans calls the “narcissism of much postmodernist writing” and “inflated self-importance, solipsism and pretentiousness.”<sup>73</sup> The Object can be distinguished from the Subject, and while the Object is always at the level of perception or representation (what isn’t?),<sup>74</sup> such Objects genuinely exist, even if they need to be sorted out through a critical procedure. The realism of the Object requires a critical, not naïve, approach, one in which the Subject and the Object interact.<sup>75</sup> To be sure, apart from perhaps archaeological remains, all existential facts have been through what Elton

<sup>67</sup> See Meyer, *Critical Realism*.

<sup>68</sup> AHJ, *Telling the Truth about History*, 247–51.

<sup>69</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 121.

<sup>70</sup> My own teacher J.D.G. Dunn distinguishes between the originating “event,” as compared to the “data” and “facts,” with the latter being the interpretive descriptions of the hard evidence of the former (a Nietzschean view). Facts are always interpretive. See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 102–4.

<sup>71</sup> A nuanced historiography makes this distinction: we study not so much the past but what survives from the past. But, few historians question that they can look “through” what survives to say something about the past itself. “Facts” exist independently of the mind, whether they are discovered or not; that is, things were said and things occurred. “Evidence” is what survives of those “existential facts.” The judgment that facts are “discrete” is a claim that facts have no meaning in and of themselves and that context and employment are not constitutive of those facts. I agree with R.J. Evans when he says: “The historian formulates a thesis, goes looking for evidence and discovers facts” (*In Defence of History*, 78).

<sup>72</sup> Henry, *I Am the Truth* (trans. S. Emanuel; *Cultural Memory in the Present*; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>73</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, 200.

<sup>74</sup> On this, see Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 129–51.

<sup>75</sup> A good summary of this can be found in Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 31–46.

calls “some cooking process,” noting that no existential facts are “raw.”<sup>76</sup> As AHJ write, “Practical realists are stuck in a contingent world.”<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the relic of that past remains and it can be studied—and some things can be known. As Jacques Le Goff puts it,

In sum, I think history is indeed a science of the past, if it is acknowledged that this past becomes an object of history through a reconstitution that is constantly questioned.<sup>78</sup>

John Lewis Gaddis is not alone in countering postmodernity’s fetishistic worry about the Subject when he states that “historians are relatively minor actors, therefore, in the coercive process.”<sup>79</sup> But the necessary recognition that Subject and Object interact to form a knowledge rooted in critical realism means that all conclusions must be recognized as approximate, probabilistic, and contingent—and, not to be missed, shaped by the interaction of Object and the Subject’s story.

An example of an existential fact, from the Gospels—which are not themselves without narrative context<sup>80</sup>—would be Jesus’ entering into the Jordan

<sup>76</sup> See Elton, *Practice of History*, 58. With his customary wit, Elton goes on: “one could at best then hope to find an historian [from the ancient past] learned, wise and sensitive enough to have cooked his materials in such a way that their natural flavour appears in the dish” (59).

<sup>77</sup> AHJ, *Telling the Truth about History*, 250.

<sup>78</sup> Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 108.

<sup>79</sup> Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> A point made time and again in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, esp. 125–36. I cannot, however, agree with Dunn at all when he says that “narratives about Jesus never began with Jesus” (131). I, for one, cannot imagine a Jesus who did not have a narrative about himself that he communicated in various ways to those who heard him and who saw him. One might plausibly ask if statements by Jesus, now rendered with a positive verdict in matters pertaining to authenticity, do not contain within them some sort of hints about his own narrative about himself? If Jesus used “Son of man,” if Jesus used some Mosaic allusion, if Jesus said something about “the one who is to come”—if Jesus said such things then we are face-to-face (however mediated through the sayings of Jesus as remembered by his followers) with a narrative that began with Jesus. Dunn’s preoccupation with the *nature* of the evidence (the result of memory) too often obscures what the historian is to do and can do with that same evidence.

My criticism, however, is less a disagreement with what he does say about the evidence than with what that evidence can provide for us—which, in my judgment, finds more of an articulation in the body of Dunn’s work than one might expect from his methodological discussions. Maybe all we have is the remembered Jesus, but Dunn’s own study frequently speaks of a typical historical Jesus who is not quite the Jesus of Mark, Matthew, Luke, or John, but who is one just “behind” them—the one who is held in common by the oral tradition. And that Jesus is a historical Jesus distinguishable from the Evangelists’ presentation. I give one quotation that seems, to me, to reveal that Dunn after all is talking in some senses of modernist study of the historical Jesus. “The criterion is this: any feature which is *characteristic within the Jesus tradition and relatively distinctive of the Jesus tradition* is most likely to go back to Jesus, that is, to reflect the original impact made by Jesus’ teaching and actions on several at least of his first disciples” (333). What I am saying is this: this Jesus, this remembered Jesus of Dunn, is not the Jesus of the Gospels *tout simple* but a Jesus distinguishable from those orally expressed Gospels, and also one who is in some sense behind

River near John the Baptist. If we are the Subject, and Jesus (as represented in the Gospels and Josephus) is the Object, and one of the existential facts is that he entered into the Jordan River, then Subject and Object can be distinguished—even if the Object can only be known through the mind of the Subject.

Second, while there is something to be said for treating heuristically the “existential facts” as genuinely discrete, the postmodernist wedge has been driven in too deep: even existential facts emerge from the waters of context and contingency and intention.<sup>81</sup> The existential facts we work with, say Jesus’ entering the Jordan River, are embedded and emplotted in their own context because humans intend and humans interpret as part of what makes them human.<sup>82</sup> It wasn’t just any river he entered; and it wasn’t during the night; and the entry wasn’t disconnected from a John who was known for baptizing people; and water, especially the Jordan, wasn’t any water; and confessions aren’t normal in the Jordan; and others joining isn’t typical. The social context, in other words, shapes how the data or facts can be represented and should be represented.

It might be useful to think more clearly about *discrete facts* and *emplotted or contextualized facts*. It can be just as easily claimed that no fact is genuinely discrete because all facts occur in contexts, as a result of intentions, and therefore have some sort of narrative or meaning constituent to their very existence.<sup>83</sup> If I were to be seen walking around my car to open the door, one might interpret that action discretely as an existential fact of walking around the car to open a door into which I did not enter. Odd behavior, to be sure, but still discrete. But, if one widens the context to see both contingency and intention in my action, one would see that I opened the door for a female, who is from other contexts determined to be my wife Kris, and that such behavior is characteristic of males such as I who were reared to open doors as an act of courtesy. In such a context, any kind of meaning-making would see my action as an act of love and kindness and chivalry. (Of course, there are other truthful explanations of the action on other occasions: maybe the door is jammed and she needs my help in prying the door loose, or maybe her hands are full and mine are not.) In general, in context, my action would be discernible and susceptible to accurate meaning-making. In such a context, treating my action as discrete would tell us less than we could and should

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them. Yes, indeed, he is a Jesus of faith even at that level, but he is distinguishable. The fundamental question for me about Dunn’s methodology is why we need a remembered Jesus more than the Jesus of the Evangelists.

<sup>81</sup> On these matters, see Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 71–109. On intention, see G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Library of Philosophy and Logic; Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). With the rise of Marxism especially, the issue of historical inevitability was pushed to the front by historiographers. A definitive argument in favor of free will and contingency and against determinism is the engaging essay, in his customary style of the winding road, of Berlin, *Historical Inevitability*, esp. 69–79. The rest of the essay is a polemic against determinism as a legitimate hermeneutic of reality.

<sup>82</sup> Again, see Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 33–52.

<sup>83</sup> See the helpful comments in Evans, *In Defence of History*, 75–102.

know. This is important because, without defense, Jenkins and other postmodernist historiographers assume the fundamental importance of treating existential facts as discrete.<sup>84</sup> But, if as I have argued, existential facts and events were originally emplotted because of human intention and because humans “read” others’ intentions through actions, etc., then there was an original meaning, however inchoate, and it is the aim of the historian to get as close to that original meaning as much as possible by working at the sources to find the original emplotment.

Third, it is at this level, at the level of contextualizing the existential facts, that meaning-making begins to take place. That is, if I understand Jesus’ entry into the Jordan River to be connected, because of a discernible context, to John the Baptist, to John’s message and mission (which were determined through other existential facts), and to Israel’s historic associations with this very location at the Jordan, then the historian can discern some kind of meaning of what Jesus was doing and what his baptism meant. This meaning is brought to the surface through narration, through what Paul Ricoeur labeled the “fictive.”<sup>85</sup>

In other words, history involves three *steps*—though we hasten to insert that *step* gives the wrong impression if one thinks that the historian proceeds from one step to the other. Actual historical study reveals that the three steps are taken at the same time because, as Marc Bloch put it so well, “In the beginning, there must be the guiding spirit.”<sup>86</sup> In fact, meaning-making occurs from the beginning of the process. This was the insight of several earlier historiographers, including Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood.<sup>87</sup> Back now to these three interrelated steps: They are (1) the *discovery* of existential facts—in our case the discovery of the gospel evidence by exegesis, or of archaeological data, or of political contexts. Then, (2) there is *criticism* of the existential facts. It is here that historical Jesus scholars have made big beds with billowy pillows and thick covers.<sup>88</sup> An existential fact often becomes nonexistent at the hand of a

<sup>84</sup> It may be observed here that this is precisely the strategy of the early form critics, who isolated events and sayings of Jesus, rendered their current contextual location in the Gospels as secondary, and then imagined more original and secondary contexts out of which those events or sayings emerged. Redaction critics followed soon after and sought to discover the theology inherent in the “fictive” or “imaginary narrative” imposed on the “discrete events” by the redactor. It is perhaps the social scientists, however, who have undercut this simplistic model of the early form critics by arguing that all persons/events/sayings are socially, culturally, and ideologically embedded and emplotted—in and of themselves. For recent studies bringing these issues to light, see Michael Moxter, “Erzählung und Ereignis: Über den Spielraum historischer Repräsentation,” in *Der historische Jesus* (ed. Schröter and Brucker), 67–88; J. Schröter, *Jesus und die Anfänge der Christologie* (BTS 47; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001); Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*.

<sup>85</sup> The literature by Paul Ricoeur, not to mention about him and as an extension of him, is immense. I cite his three-volume set of essays: *Time and Narrative* (trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer; 3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988).

<sup>86</sup> Bloch, *Historian’s Craft*, 65.

<sup>87</sup> B. Croce, *History* (trans. D. Ainslie; New York: Russell & Russell, 1960); R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946).

<sup>88</sup> See below, under “The Issue of Historical Judgment.”



skeptical historical Jesus scholar. Some scholars, many perhaps, think Jesus was baptized but know not where—not because there is not evidence that Jesus was baptized near where the children of Israel reportedly crossed the Jordan (e.g., John 1:22-23, 26) but because that evidence is judged, through criticism, to be unreliable.<sup>89</sup>

Now we get to the significance of the postmodernist enterprise. Next, (3) the historian begins to make meaning by interpreting what he or she judges to be critically reliable fact in its context and for the author's own intention.<sup>90</sup> It is

<sup>89</sup> So, when James D.G. Dunn disagrees with me because “the tradition contains no indication in that regard,” he must mean that the evidence in John is not to be regarded as an “existential fact.” See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 378 n.182. That is, that John 3:26 is not part of the reliable tradition.

<sup>90</sup> There was a long-standing debate between E.H. Carr and G.R. Elton over whether something becomes historical only when it is swallowed up into a historical narrative, or whether events in and of themselves are historical. Carr, for himself, thought history was about taking facts and placing them into a narrative in order to shape the present and the future, and thought that objectivity was all about what from the past fit into the course of the future. See Carr, *What is History?* 36–69. Elton, on the other hand, had a different design: all facts were historical; some were more significant than others. But, whether or not they had functional use for the future had nothing to do with their being historical or objective. See Elton, *Practice of History*, 51–87. Carr has been followed in this regard by Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 1–16.

It is my view that no historian ever studies anything purely for its own sake (though I have undertaken some studies because I had to for an assignment). All historians have a reason for what they are studying, even if that reason is curiosity—but nearly all of them render judgment about their Object in the process. As an example, some modern historical Jesus scholars trumpet rather boldly that they are not, at the personal level, Christians in any ordinary sense and that this makes them more objective or neutral in their judgments. But, what becomes clear upon examination of their narratives about Jesus is that their Jesus tends, more often than not (and I know of almost no exceptions), to lean in the direction of their own belief systems. Jesus, thus, can become an enthusiastic apocalyptic and not worthy of utter devotion, and (what I am suggesting) their own non-faith in such a Jesus can be confirmed. What would be rare is someone who came to the conclusion that Jesus was utterly divine but who did not think him worthy of devotion. In other words, all historical Jesus scholars have an aim in what they are writing about Jesus. Thus, knowledge and power are related, though I maintain they are not mutually determinative. See the excellent study of this topic in Evans, *In Defence of History*, 191–223.

A good example of this can be seen in J.H. Charlesworth, “The Historical Jesus and Exegetical Theology,” *PSB* 22 (2001): 45–63, who begins his study (45) with this claim: “All scholars who are distinguished in Jesus Research acknowledge that the historical-critical method needs to be employed.” A postmodernist of a deconstructionist spirit could be justified in seeing this as nothing more than the assertion of power—those who don't do historical Jesus studies by “my” or “our” method will not be acknowledged, and, because we acknowledge one another, “our” studies are the best. However, inasmuch as I think Charlesworth does state the facts straight in this regard—that the best scholarship is genuinely critical—I tend to think he is not playing the game of power, but objectively stating a historiographical truth. This, however, is not to say that genuine insights cannot be gleaned from those who operate with the historical-critical method. Inasmuch as Charlesworth is a modernist historian, his statement intentionally includes the postmodernist approach to Jesus. He speaks of “true historians,” (48), of “virtually *bruta facta*” (49), and includes here “healing miracles”—which is not a “brute fact” but instead explanations of something else. He also speaks of the “purely historical and scientific methods” that must be “disinterested” (62). In

at this point that narration begins to shape the choice of facts, the order those facts are to find, and what meaning will occur as a result of that narration. That is, the historian makes meaning through narration, as a result of imagination,<sup>91</sup> through sorting through the evidence with a narrative that ties everything together, whether or not one prefers Ricoeur's "fictive" label. History is not just discovery and judgment, as if judgment will somehow work a magic that turns those discovered facts into meaningful story. No, the "task of the historian is to explain not only what happened, but why it happened and why it happened in the way it did."<sup>92</sup>

This occurs whether the historian is doing something large and formidable, as Peter Brown does in his *Rise of Western Christendom* or Martin Hengel does with his *Hellenism and Judaism* or E.P. Sanders does with his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* or James D.G. Dunn with his *The Parting of the Ways*. Or, it occurs when some historian narrows his or her scope to a singular event, theme or saying, as can be seen in Kathleen Corley's *Women and the Historical Jesus* or in Tom Holmén's *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking*. In each of these studies, whether big or small, it is the historian, not the existential fact, who makes meaning through what some classic historiographers call interconnectedness. It is the business of a historian to make meaning of existential facts by bringing them into a coherent narrative—and the better written the more likely it is that the narrative will catch on. Bloodless historians create bloodless meanings—with the proviso that the sanguine do not necessarily write better histories.

This raises the question of truth. Are some narratives or meanings more truthful than others? Is there, at times, meaning inherent to an existential fact. That is, does the very act of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River at the hand of John the Baptist need anything more than exegesis (a "bringing out of what is there")? At this point a wedge can be pushed into the discussion. If, as some postmodernists suppose, all events are indeed discrete in the sense that they are not connected and there is no meaning inherent in the event itself, then one must conclude that no historical narrative is true in the sense of final. Why? Because there is no standard against which one can measure the narrative to claim that it is true (assuming here some sort of correspondence or coherency theory for truth). It is here that the postmodernist enjoys the role of using the dagger. Because of his or her position of irony, the postmodernist delights in the claim that all is rhetoric, or narrative, or language. But, as Richard J. Evans points out rather often, no postmodernist historiography permits the role to be reversed—that is, no postmodernist permits his or her narrative to be seen as nothing more than ideology and language, and nearly all such postmodernists

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addition, Charlesworth proceeds to say that while the Christian faith is rooted in history, it transcends that history (62). This is an excellent article on the topic of this chapter.

<sup>91</sup> On imagination, which is discussed by most historiographers, see Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 35–52.

<sup>92</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 101.

trumpet their claim to have a postmodernist method that tells that the (even if they don't use that term) story about method and about what can be known.<sup>93</sup> Oddly enough, the postmodernist claims his or her irony as the truth.

Call it common sense realism or critical realism,<sup>94</sup> or whatever else you'd like, no human lives in a total denial of some sense of truthfulness.<sup>95</sup> An example may help. We live in Chicago. We are fans of the American game of baseball, and that means we cheer for the Chicago Cubs. The Chicago Cubs have not won a pennant in decades, and last year, on the verge of clinching a decisive game and putting themselves in position to go to the World Series, an event occurred (so far as I can tell) in the sixth game of the National League Playoff Series. That event involved a Cubs fan named Steve Bartman (may he nonetheless live to a ripe old age). The fan reached up to snatch a baseball that had been hit by a batter into foul territory, and Chicago Cubs player Moises Alou reached out to catch the ball. The fan "interfered" by touching the ball. The result was that the player did not, and could not, catch the ball. Had Alou caught the ball, perhaps, just perhaps, the Cubs would have won the game and been able to go to the World Series—and who knows, perhaps they would have prevailed there as well. (A recent television game between the Chicago Cubs and their dreaded rivals, the St. Louis Cardinals, showed that some fans had a high opinion of Steve Bartman. A Cardinals fan projected a sign that said, "Bartman for President.")

Now, here's my point: according to a strict postmodernist interpretation, if we had not been in the stadium, all we would have known about the game is what newspaper writers told us, what radio announcers relayed to us, and what television analysts showed us. They communicated to us what they wanted to for their own reasons, according to their own ideologies, and for the assertion of their own power. What we don't know is the "reality" of the event, because there is no such thing as a singular reality. We could, by analyzing the residue of historical evidence—newspaper reports, eyewitnesses (one of whom was my son), and TV camera shots (which distort depth perceptions), come to our conclusion and tell our own story. But, no story would be true. All we would have would be rhetoric and all we would have would be ideology.

It might be added, as my colleague David Koeller—an avid baseball fan and a professional historiographer—pointed out to me, that the *social context* of a baseball game informs how we narrate the incident. That is, a social context involving how the game is played, how fans behave at games, how fans respond to fellow fans when they touch baseballs on the margins of the field of play, how contingencies at one moment in a game impact later events in the game. The

<sup>93</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, throughout.

<sup>94</sup> On "critical realism," see esp. Meyer, *Critical Realism*.

<sup>95</sup> A recent important examination of this can be seen in Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, where he explains what he calls a "State of Nature" in which Accuracy and Sincerity are required for humans to exist with one another.

debate that ensued in Chicagoland, which involved Steve Bartman finding himself at times a Wanted Man, was a debate between various individuals within the same social context—some thinking his act was trivial and others thinking he was to blame for the Cubs' loss.

A consistent postmodernist, however, would argue there are only narrations of this event, none of which has any claim either to truth or to accuracy when it comes to the significance of the event. I think this construction of reality is as difficult to live with as the denial of the law of contradiction.<sup>96</sup> More importantly, I think no postmodernist lives this way—most of them who heard about the game would think they knew what happened and most of them could make meaning out of it—and a meaning that they would think truthful at some level. (And this would be so even for those who only heard reports by friends and fans.) Most postmodernist historiographers, also, would have an opinion on contingency, what would have happened had the man not reached out and touched the ball. Many, and I am among that group, think Alou would have caught the ball and the Cubs would have most likely won the game. None, I think, would say that the fan touching the ball was simply a discrete event that had no connection to the baseball player or even to the outcome of the game.<sup>97</sup>

We live in a world where we have to make meaning to live, and some meanings are more realistic and truthful than others. The person who looks at a baseball coming at him or her and has a world in which meaning-making does not observe the rules of gravity may get whacked in the face—and what I am saying is that people don't live like this. Not even postmodernists, who seem to have plenty of starch in their drawers. One who has a meaning-making narrative in which the laws of gravity are at work has a more truthful narrative than the one who does not.

Returning from our digression into the pit of nether gloom that is Cubs baseball, we can look once again at what truth means when it comes to history and meaning-making. In contrast to the postmodernist agenda, *if* facts are not simply discrete, *if* events have context, *if* the contingency of existential facts is not simply chaos, *if* humans have intentions in their actions and sayings—that is, in the existential facts for which there is a historical residue—*then* some narratives and meanings are more truthful than others. Those that are most truthful are those that can be demonstrated to cohere more or less with the existential facts in their historical contexts. As Richard Evans puts it, in what can only be called a chastened post-postmodernist modernism,

I will look humbly at the past and say despite them all: it really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it

<sup>96</sup> This is pointed out often by historiographers and philosophers. A notable example is Himmelfarb, *New History and the Old*.

<sup>97</sup> So meaningful was that event to some Cubs fans that the ball was enshrined for some time in a bar near Wrigley Field and this winter was blown up, in front of cheering fans, and at considerable expense. So ended, it is believed, the curse against the Cubs.

happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant.<sup>98</sup>

Postmodernists teach us that our own narratives are not equivalent with that reality in the past, and they remind us that our narratives need to be held lightly with the obvious potential of being revised and even jettisoned, but they cannot steal from us this: that our narratives either more or less cohere with what we can know about existential facts and their contexts in such a way that we can derive a narrative that approximates truth. The best histories are those that narrate the most significant events in such a manner that meaning and events are close.

### THE HISTORICAL JESUS: BRIEF REMARKS

We can begin with this: Christianity believes in history. Historiographers are fond of commenting that history as we now know it was washed into the tide of generations by Israel and the early Christians who believed, as is now clear, in “events” and “sayings” as put together into a “narrative.”<sup>99</sup> As Dunn, joining a long line of English (and Scottish—may the land, “sae far awa’,” retain its honor) theologians, states it,

For those within the Christian tradition of faith, the issue is even more important. Christian belief in the incarnation, in the events of long ago in Palestine of the late 20s and early 30s AD as the decisive fulcrum point in human history, leaves them no choice but to be interested in the events and words of those days. . . . A faith which regards all critical scrutiny of its historical roots as inimical to faith can never hold up its head or lift up its voice in any public forum.<sup>100</sup>

Two brief points draw to the surface the issue about the fundamental significance, for faith itself, of the original Jesus and our historical representations of him—which representations can never be escaped, from the least informed to the most articulate believer. First, the Apostle Paul contends that the entirety of the Christian faith is founded on the fact of Jesus being raised from the dead.<sup>101</sup> He states this is the Christian tradition (i.e., narrative representation) from the very beginning (1 Cor 15:3-7). Perhaps his most pointed lines are these:

*If* there is no resurrection of the dead, *then* not even Christ has been raised. And, *if* Christ has not been raised, *then* our preaching is useless and so is your faith (1 Cor 15:13-14).

That is, the Christian gospel is absolutely dependent on the understanding that Jesus Christ was dead, was buried, and came back to life—in the words of N.T.

<sup>98</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, 253.

<sup>99</sup> E.g., Elton, *Practice of History*, 2; Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> The line is from Robert Burns, “My Native Land Sae Far Awa’,” in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns (1759–1796)* (Collins: Glasgow, n.d.), 462. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 100–101.

Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, acquired “life *after* life-after-death.” This, in other words, is the claim that faith is rooted in the facticity of an event, a particular event, namely, the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. This is one reason why historiographers often claim Christianity is a religion of history.

A second example is from the Apostles’ Creed, in which, whenever one dates it, the faith of Christianity is expressed not so much as a belief in the Bible as a belief in the events to which the Bible witnesses—namely those brought about by the Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>102</sup> Events—as put into a holistic Christian narrative—are at the foundation of this unifying creed of Christians: God creating and the Son dying, descending, rising, and ascending.<sup>103</sup> To be sure, there is a narrative understanding of these existential events or, to use Ricoeur’s language, a *fictional representation*, but if those events are simple fictions or myths, then some serious damage is done to the content of what it is that Christians affirm.

What is also affirmed today is that the historical Jesus matters.<sup>104</sup> What do historical Jesus scholars mean when they speak of the historical Jesus? In light of the brief survey of historiography above, it can only mean this: the historical Jesus is a narrative representation of the existential facts about Jesus that survive critical scrutiny. The reason N.T. Wright makes a strong case for the study of Jesus as an instance of history is because he renders history into a story, a narrative representation on the basis of a conscious method. That is, his study is not simply a study of existential facts that survive scrutiny, but it is a complete narrative representation of those existential facts. It puts all things together into a robust, engaging story. This is what, according to historiographers, genuine history does. I do not mean by this that N.T. Wright’s study of Jesus is the best, though I am partial to much of what he says,<sup>105</sup> but what I do mean is that N.T. Wright’s study of Jesus is exemplary when it comes to the matter of historiography. There are some historiographical rivals, namely the historical Jesus studies of B.F. Meyer, E.P. Sanders, R.A. Horsley, James D.G. Dunn, the imaginative J.D. Crossan and the even more imaginative B.D. Chilton, but none of these provides as rich or as complete a narrative representation.

<sup>101</sup> On how Paul understood the resurrection, see now the exhaustive tome of N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 207–398. See also M.J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); *From Grave to Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). For the broader discussion of how Paul expresses faith in past events, the brief section of Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, retains potency; see pp. 60–75.

<sup>102</sup> On creeds, see now J. Pelikan, *Credo* (vol. 1 of *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and V. R. Hotchkiss; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); L.T. Johnson, *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>103</sup> See the comments of Charlesworth, “Historical Jesus and Exegetical Theology,” 62–63.

<sup>104</sup> See, e.g., R. Bauckham, “The Future of Jesus Christ,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. M. Bockmuehl), 265–80.

<sup>105</sup> As can be seen in my *A New Vision for Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Scholars will no doubt dispute some, or much, of the evidence that has survived Wright's critical scrutiny—which they have a right to do if they are doing history. In disputing the existential facts Wright uses, less evidence will survive and a new narrative representation will have to be offered. The point here is not which evidence survives, but what one does with the evidence that does survive. For it to be good history it must be an engaging narrative. To be sure, some studies are only partial (*histoire en miettes*) because, as monographs or articles, they examine only some of the evidence or are narrowly focused. But for something to pass muster with the historiographers, a narrative is needed to give existential facts their appropriate meaning.

Others, of course, tell a different narrative. B.F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders, who have had their share of tussles, tell the narrative of the restoration of Israel; J.D. Crossan tells the narrative of a countercultural Jesus; while Richard Horsley tells the narrative of a socially engaged Jesus; and Bruce Chilton tells the narrative of a *mamzer* (“illegitimate child”) who was also a mystic . . . and the narratives go on and on. And what needs to be seen as “on and on” is that each new *re-presentation* of Jesus is, in effect, a new gospel to be believed by the historical Jesus scholar and by any who care to agree with that scholar. I know of no other way of putting this. Historical Jesus studies tend to construe existential facts into a new narrative, and a new narrative adds up to a new Gospel.

It is this “on and on” that causes the problem we are facing: what role are these narrative representations of Jesus to play in the theological discipline? The issue here is found in one of the words italicized above: the historical Jesus is the narrative *re-presentation* of the existential facts about Jesus that survive critical scrutiny. Every historical Jesus placed on the table is a re-presentation of Jesus and it is a re-presentation of the Jesus in the canonical four Gospels—sometimes by eschewing the overall narrative of those four gospels for a non-canonical representation in favor of the historical Jesus scholar's own rendition of what Jesus was “really like.” It is this “on and on” of re-presentations that raises a critical question for the theological discipline.

There are two deep traditions of a narrative about Jesus—the four canonical Gospels and the various creeds of the church—that have shaped the entire history of the church and the role Jesus himself plays in that church. Are the new narrative representations of Jesus to oust those two deep traditions? Are they to supplement them? Or, are they to correct them?

It can be said without exaggeration that the church's own presentation of Jesus in the four Gospels, or in the creeds, is the governing story of Jesus.<sup>106</sup> It is this story, or history, that won the day and that has shaped the self-identity of the church for two millennia.<sup>107</sup> This presentation is the church's “memory” and

<sup>106</sup> See F. Watson, “The Quest for the Real Jesus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. Bockmuehl), 156–69; C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (New York: Oxford, 1996).

<sup>107</sup> Deconstructionists, of course, may suggest that the church's story is precisely the problem: it

it is *both* memorization of past and generation of identity and future.<sup>108</sup> The church makes the claim that neither the modernist nor the postmodernist has either the goose by the neck or the mirror by the top. Instead, the church claims it has the *gospel*, which can be found by reading the four canonical Gospels or by studying the church's creeds. By and large, the church doesn't eat goose and it does not care to look at itself in a mirror. It believes instead in the gospel, the narrative about Jesus that mediates Jesus to those who read it.<sup>109</sup>

The problem, therefore, with other re-presentations of Jesus is *scriptural*—what role is the Scripture to play in the church's understanding of Jesus? The problem is also *christological*—what role are the traditional affirmations of Jesus to play in the church's understanding of other re-presentations of Jesus? The problem is *epistemological*—how do the re-presentations of Jesus cohere with the already existing canonical presentations of Jesus? And, finally, it is *ecclesiological*—what role is the church's own self-identity to play in judging new re-presentations of Jesus? Is it not the case, whether we come at this from the angle of postmodernism, tradition history, or just common sense, that a new narrative of Jesus will re-shape the church's own self-identity? As Robert Morgan put it in his ruminative essay,

The objection to this procedure [of re-presenting Jesus], and what some would call its theological *impossibility*, is that it substitutes a religiously indeterminate historical presentation of Jesus for the Gospels and most Christians' theological evaluation of him.... In proposing a substitute for Jesus as the subject of Christological predication, Strauss [who is the subject of Morgan's essay at this point] was abandoning Christian faith. . . . Those who place a historical reconstruction of Jesus at the head of their presentations [of NT theology] are wittingly or unwittingly placing a question mark against all traditional Christian ways of understanding Jesus. . . . [For] purely historical reconstructions are inevitably at odds with traditional Christianity. . . . [And, to] replace it [the Christian faith about Jesus Christ] with a historical statement about Jesus, however true in its own terms, is no mere modification but a radical break with historical

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was an ideology that had sufficient power to control the story (as did Dante in his *Divine Comedy*). Constantine has been overestimated here, but having said that, we must recognize that (1) that story was not invented by Constantine; it had deep, original roots in the Christian tradition. And, (2) it is that story that has shaped the identity of the church ever since. To interfere with that story is to interfere with the identity of the church—which is what some want to do today (e.g., Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* [New York: Random, 2003]; Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003]).

<sup>108</sup> On which, see esp. Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 51–99. See also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 125–36; and Dunn's colleague, Stephen Barton, "Many Gospels, One Jesus?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. Bockmuehl), 170–83, esp. 178–83.

<sup>109</sup> The issue of the four-fold testimony cannot be explored here. One can say that the church forms its identity on the basis of a four-fold narrative and on the basis of a synthesis of those four narratives.



Christianity. . . . It is one thing to be interested in the historical reality of Jesus, and to see there the criterion of the kerygma (Ebeling), but quite another matter to substitute a purely historical for a kerygmatic presentation of Jesus in this context.<sup>110</sup>

Here is what I think is a stunning line:

But to make these hypothetically reconstructed early experiments [he is speaking here of hypothetical sources like Q, M, and L, but it applies *mutatis mutandis*] normative for Christian faith and life today would be an extraordinary novelty.<sup>111</sup>

An even more complicating factor, and one into which we cannot delve here, is that the church, in opting for the four canonical Gospels (and the creeds to which those very four Gospels contributed) also eschewed other narrative presentations of Jesus. That is, the church judged that the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* were not consistent enough with the *canonical narrative* to be accepted as authoritative for shaping Christian theology and self-identity.<sup>112</sup>

This corners all other narrative re-presentations of Jesus and leads us to this question: did the church, by accepting only these four Gospels, render a judgment once and for all about all other attempted re-presentations of Jesus? We could answer this with a yes and a no—a yes for any grand narrative claiming final authority but no for any narrative claiming some sort of insight into the canonical Gospels or some kind of support or supplement to them. So, we ask again, how do the various historical Jesus re-presentations fit into the theological discipline?

## HISTORICAL JESUS STUDIES AND THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE

What lurks behind much of the discussion of both modernist and postmodernist historiography is the simple observation that a Christian faith embraces,

<sup>110</sup> Robert Morgan, "The Historical Jesus and the Theology of the New Testament," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (ed. L.D. Hurst and N.T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 187–206, here 191–95.

<sup>111</sup> Morgan, "Historical Jesus," 203. See also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 125–27, though I think Dunn presses too far the representation of the historical Jesus and the church's Jesus as a contrary relationship. There is no necessary distinction between a historical Jesus and the church's Jesus. As an example, my friend Darrell Bock's book on Jesus is as close to the church's Jesus as one can get for a historical Jesus representation; see his *Jesus according to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) and his methodological discussion in *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). I am not agreeing with Bock so much as pointing out that the motivation of historical Jesus studies is not simply to offer a representation of Jesus in competition with the church, and indeed the results of such presentations support my assertion.

<sup>112</sup> I do not wish to enter here into a debate about the role these other gospels are to play in the articulation of other representations of Jesus. Of course, they do have a role and will continue to do so. Consider, for example, Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, whose own story shows that personal faith and historical representation are not isolable (30–73).

at some level, an upper case History, a macro-scheme of where things started and where they are ultimately going.<sup>113</sup> In other words, because Christian faith by nature confesses both *aitios* and *telos*, it cannot be simply postmodernist—for postmodernity rejects such explanations in its disprivileging of any reading. Furthermore, to the degree that modernity eschews the “question of God” it also eschews a Christian, teleological understanding of history.<sup>114</sup>

This Christian tradition, seen in such formative thinkers as Augustine, Sextus Julius Africanus, Eusebius, Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede, grounds history for the Christian in a *genesis*, a *telos*, and an *eschatos*. So, while technical historiography moves along modernist or postmodernist lines, in the public forum where faith assumptions may need to be bracketed for the sake of conversation, a truly Christian historiography, not to say a Christian historiographical approach to Jesus and how he understood his death, will need to carve its own path. To use the inimitable terms of Isaiah Berlin, Christian historiographers are more or less hedgehogs.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps they will wonder if they are genuine hedgehogs at times, but for a historian to qualify as a Christian, there will be a noticeable hedgehog quality about their work.

What is also noticeable is this: postmodernist historiography and Christian historiography do, on some stretches of the crossing of the waters, join hands in fellowship. At other times the postmodernist abandons the starboard side to the modernist or, one might say, the traditionalist. In light of our prior discussions about both postmodernist and modernist historiography and the historical Jesus, what can we say about the role of the historical Jesus in the theological discipline?

The prefatory word that was brought closer to the starboard side of the debate when Bultmann spoke of *Vorverständnis*, and now stands like an elephant on the poop deck, is this: everyone has an agenda, a motivation, and a purpose whenever studying the historical Jesus.<sup>116</sup> It is not enough to admit the role presuppositions play in interpretation, though this is where we ought to begin. What is needed is not so much frank admission and then a jolly carrying on as usual, as if admission is justification, but instead the willingness to let our presuppositions (Subject) be challenged by the evidence (Object). I cannot agree with the tone of F.R. Ankersmit’s claim in his chapter, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” when he says,

<sup>113</sup> I am grateful to my colleague, Bradley Nassif, for his response to this section of this chapter.

<sup>114</sup> On which, see N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (trans. G. Reavey; London: Geoffrey Bles/Centenary, 1945); *The Destiny of Man* (trans. N. Duddington; London: Geoffrey Bles/Centenary, 1945); C. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950); S.J. Case, *The Christian Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943).

<sup>115</sup> See Berlin, “Hedgehog and the Fox.”

<sup>116</sup> An older, but still eminently valuable study of the role of presuppositions can be found in G.N. Stanton, “Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism,” in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I.H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 60-71.

Historical writing is, so to speak, the *experimental garden where we may try out different political and moral values* and where the overarching aesthetic criteria of representational success will allow us to assess their respective merits and shortcomings.<sup>117</sup>

Postmodernism teaches us that we will never thoroughly jettison our presuppositions (though this is hardly something new to postmodernity), but it tends to permit an admission to become a justification (Jenkins and less so with Ankersmit)—and a legitimate, proud one at that—while what is needed is the critical realism of B.F. Meyer or the practical realism of AHJ, a critical interaction with the evidence and scholarship so that a measure of objectivity is achieved. But this, as I say, is but the prefatory word of what we can learn from modern historiography. What it tells us is this: *if* we all have motivation, we can nonetheless ask if a given historical Jesus study qualifies to be a *Christian* motivation about Jesus. Maybe we can never write history objectively, but what we do write can be useful, and Christians can learn to write about Jesus in genuinely Christian ways. If we do so, as the historiographers Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier so eloquently state,

We can thus implicate our audiences in the histories we write, making them see *how we see* as well as what we see. If we do so, we can produce useful knowledge about the past, or at least about our access to that past.<sup>118</sup>

From these considerations of what Christian history is and what role presuppositions do play in all historiographical undertakings, we can now turn to how today's scholars appropriate historical Jesus studies in theology. There are at least four uses of the Jesus traditions and the historical Jesus for constructing theology, and they apply *mutatis mutandis* to what Jesus thought about his death. First, for some the historical Jesus' perceptions of his death are but relics of history and, while questions about him are interesting and raise issues about religion, spirituality, and faith, ultimately neither he nor his perceptions matter to personal religion or to social vision.

Second, for some the historical Jesus, as reconstructed and re-presented, is the *norma normans* of the gospel itself. If, it would be argued, Jesus never thought of his death or never gave to it any significance, then the early developments about atonement theology and all the later accretions would be well-intended expressions of myth and ideology, but ultimately unimportant for faith and life. True, not everything can be traced back to Jesus, but it would make a great deal of difference to know that the central tenet of Christian faith—namely, that Jesus died for sins—was (or was not) at least traceable to Jesus himself.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 99 (italics added).

<sup>118</sup> Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 148.

<sup>119</sup> There has been a constant appeal for biblical scholars to recognize the historical orientation of earliest Christianity. Thus, cf. E. Hoskyns and N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London:

Third, for some Jesus is known only *through* the Christian Scriptures in a narrative depiction: that is all we know, we can't really get behind it; and if we did, it wouldn't really matter for faith. Historical study is well and good, and plays some positively useful roles, but its role in theology is limited to what it can contribute to the Christian tradition. Fourth, for some what really matters is religious, historical, social, cultural, political, and intellectual development. Today we are enlightened moderns, and it does no good to pretend that we can get back to the "original truth" in order to critique our perceptions of religious faith by that pristine, reconstructed image. Religious faith is not dependent on historical study, and modern consciousness transcends antiquity. In fact, for many of these enlightened moderns, to absolve Christianity of concepts like atonement, expiation, and crucifixion would be a deed well done. In closing down the curtains on this section, I wish now to turn to three considerations of what we can learn from historiographical discussions about the historical Jesus' role in theological construction.

First, we can return to the postmodernist claim about what history is and offer this challenge: if our understanding of history and the historical Jesus is near the mark and we are concerned about how the historical Jesus fits into the theological discipline, historical Jesus scholars can only offer narrative representations of Jesus that fit with the relics about Jesus in the surviving evidence. That is, they cannot make of him what they will without being accused of the charge of historical misrepresentation. At this point the historical Jesus scholar (nearly all so far as I can see) parts company with the postmodernist radical who thinks we can make of history whatever we want because, after all, it is only rhetoric, language, and ideology; or, as Ankersmit states in the quotation above, an "experimental garden where we may try out different political and moral values." If history is merely a branch of aesthetics and literature, then the task of the historian is to offer as good a narrative as he or she can. I would counter with the words of Marc Bloch: "Explorers of the past are never quite free. The past is their tyrant."<sup>120</sup>

The limitation of every historical representation of Jesus to the evidence inevitably means that the canonical Gospels themselves are often held accountable to the evidence as well. At some level, at least for most historical Jesus scholars, the Gospels themselves become "authoritative" to the degree that the Gospels cohere with evidence that can be discovered about Jesus and judged "authentic" (on which see below).<sup>121</sup>

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Faber & Faber, 1931); Jürgen Roloff, *Das Kerygma und der irdische Jesus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); G.N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (SNTSMS 27; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); E.E. Lemcio, *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (SNTSMS 68; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); R.A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* (SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>120</sup> Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, 59.

<sup>121</sup> See the orthodox presentation in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (rev. ed.; Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), esp. his chapter "The Problem of Historical Knowledge" (pp. 157–91). It is also

The evidence determines the parameters of what a historical Jesus scholar should say about Jesus. “In some cases,” as Richard Evans states it, “the narrative is there in the sources.”<sup>122</sup> The old cry of Sir Geoffrey Elton, “to the sources” (*ad fontes*), is at the foundation of nearly every historical Jesus study I know of. We have wildly different portraits of Jesus in the studies of B.F. Meyer, E.P. Sanders, R.A. Horsley, J.D. Crossan, J.P. Meier, N.T. Wright, and B.D. Chilton, but each of them claims—overtly—that their representation of Jesus is grounded in the evidence and that it comes from that evidence. They are each, to use our historiographical taxonomy, modernists through and through. They believe that we can discover the evidence, judge it through a critical process, find (rather than impose) its meaning in its context with clarity; and that they can, sometimes with more potency than other times, represent it all in a compelling narrative. But, as modernist historiographers, each believes in the evidence—and each is not all that unlike Sir Geoffrey Elton in orientation.

Since I have placed Carr and Elton in the same category of modernist historiographer, I must add that many if not most historical Jesus scholars tend to make a presentation of Jesus that fits with what they think the future of Christianity holds, as E.H. Carr so clearly argued. While each may make the claim that they are simply after the facts and simply trying to figure out what Jesus was really like—and while most don’t quite say this, most do think this is what they are doing—nearly every one of them presents what they would like the church, or others with faith, to think about Jesus. Clear examples of this can be found in the studies of Marcus Borg, N.T. Wright, E.P. Sanders, and B.D. Chilton—in fact, we would not be far short of the mark if we claimed that this pertains to each scholar—always and forever.<sup>123</sup> And each claims that his or her presentation of Jesus is rooted in the evidence, and only in the evidence.

If that evidence is likened to a marble block, then the historical Jesus scholar may have to chisel away chunk after chunk, but the historical Jesus scholar is not permitted to add marble to the already determined block. E.P. Sanders, J.D. Crossan, Kathleen Corley, N.T. Wright, and James D.G. Dunn, for instance, each chisel away different parts of the marble block, but each confessedly is working on the same block and trying to find what the block was intended to be—as a good sculptor will always admit.

Second, a word about hermeneutics, a topic which (again) cannot be given here the attention it deserves. I build here on the profound work of A.C. Thiselton in his *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* and F. Watson in his *Text and*

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found, in a completely unorthodox way, in the work of Maurice Casey. See his *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God* (Edward Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, 1985–1986; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). Both believe what should be believed is what we discover to be historically accurate.

<sup>122</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, 147.

<sup>123</sup> This is precisely why Martin Kähler’s famous claim that faith is not based on historical study is disproven by history. Scholars and those who follow them—in the church or not in the church—believe in their own narratives.

*Truth*.<sup>124</sup> Thiselton demonstrates that postmodernity operates with a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” and, as Keith Jenkins’s works on historiography reveal, it is a hermeneutic that sees texts as ideological graspings for power written for a cadre who utilize that text as an assertion of power. Watson, for his part, demonstrates satisfactorily an older notion: a text is an attempt at communication. As Kevin Vanhoozer argues, texts are at some level persons and, as Alan Jacobs contends, texts must be treated as our “neighbors.”<sup>125</sup> Perhaps another way of saying the same thing, only in terms of faith instead of love, is found in Robert Morgan:

The conflict is thus no longer between faith and reason but between a reasonable faith and a faithless reason.<sup>126</sup>

I contend that a hermeneutic of suspicion is fundamentally at odds with the Christian gospel, which is what a theological discipline is most concerned with. In other words, what a Christian needs is not a hermeneutic of suspicion but, as Alan Jacobs brilliantly presents, a “hermeneutic of love”<sup>127</sup> or a “hermeneutic of trust.”<sup>128</sup> Jacobs, building on the profound but often neglected study *On Christian Doctrine* by Augustine, notes that a charitable interpretation not only fully embraces the distinction between Subject and Object, but also knows that genuine hearing can only take place when the reader subordinates himself to the Other (or, Object) in order to hear and to understand and to love. This is not some soft-kneed nonsense that Jacobs offers us, but a hermeneutic that is finding echoes in other fields as well, as the study of Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt shows.<sup>129</sup> As Jacobs states it,

<sup>124</sup> A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); F. Watson, *Text and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>125</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 455–68; Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), 9–35. The recent impact on hermeneutics by theology, as can for example be seen in Vanhoozer, ought to be felt by those historical Jesus scholars who believe (1) in God and (2) that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. A self-revealing God is the sort of God who makes interpersonal textual communication and historical knowledge possible.

<sup>126</sup> Morgan, “Historical Jesus,” 199.

<sup>127</sup> I recently noticed that N.T. Wright spoke of this in his 1992 study; see *New Testament and the People of God*, 64, who himself points to Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 604–11.

<sup>128</sup> See Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*. On a larger scale, see also D.K. Clark, *Empirical Realism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); J. Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); C. Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>129</sup> It is clearly anticipated in P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (trans. R.A. Harrisville; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 3–96; see also Meyer’s later study, *Reality and Illusion*. See H.G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Discernment is required to know what kind of gift one is being presented with, and in what spirit to accept it (if at all), but a universal suspicion of gifts and givers, like an indiscriminate acceptance of all gifts, constitutes an abdication of discernment in favor of a simplistic *a priorism* that smothers the spirit.<sup>130</sup>

Because the hermeneutic of love knows that genuine love is righteous and holy, the hermeneutic speaks the truth about what it reads, judges some things good and some things bad, but it nonetheless operates on the basis of trust and love rather than suspicion. While it may conclude that some texts are genuinely ideological graspings of power to be rendered worthless—who would not judge the Marquis de Sade’s *In Praise of Folly* as a monstrosity?—a proper reading cannot begin with suspicion. Instead Christian and non-Christian readers need to recognize that texts are intended to be “communication events” between two humans made in the image of God and that a genuinely humane reader is one who trusts the words of the others.<sup>131</sup> This approach is as humane as it is Christian.

When it comes to the historical Jesus, I am not claiming that a Christian, because he or she adopts a chastened but genuine hermeneutics of love and trust, thinks everything in the Gospels is historical simply by inclusion.<sup>132</sup> This would miss the general strength of our point about hermeneutics. What it means is that the historical Jesus scholar would not assume the texts are unhistorical or so ideologically driven that they must be deconstructed and reshaped by one’s own ideology. This sort of treatment of the Gospels is, in my view, the destruction of communication because it refuses to listen to the Other (Object, the Gospels) and it intends the Subject (reader) to swallow up the Object in his or her own ideological agenda. Communication, which is what happens in any genuine love, is broken when suspicion gains the upper hand. Again, this does not mean that the Gospels contain only red letters—to use the coding of the Jesus Seminar—but it does delay the judgment until after genuine encounter and reading of the text occur.

Third, history as defined by historiographers, especially of a structuralist and postmodernist sort, involves the narration of existential facts. When it comes to the theological discipline, therefore, there are some narrations that are “good” and there are some that are “bad,” with both good and bad defined by what the theological discipline itself defines as its own narrative. Which means this: since history inevitably is a “narrative,” there is either one defining narrative or there are an infinite number of narratives. Since the theological disciplines involve Scriptures and creeds, there is a single normative narrative, or what we could also call a four-fold normative narrative about Jesus.

<sup>130</sup> Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 24 (italics added.)

<sup>131</sup> See here Watson, *Text and Truth*.

<sup>132</sup> See the useful postscript on Old Testament theology and history in John Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 859–83.

That is, if history is a narrative, and if we are concerned with the role of modern historical narratives in the overall theological discipline, we have no options other than surrendering either to the absence of normative narrative or to the church's normative narrative. To use the words of my professor's own book on the historical Jesus, all we have at the normative level is the "remembered Jesus." It is this remembered Jesus that was the normative narrative. If we recognize, as we have no choice but to do, the *ecclesial* context of nearly every representation of Jesus, we are bound to confess that narrations about Jesus are expressions of an ongoing, and living tradition. As Dunn has so well observed,

This solution, applied to the Gospels, does not, of course, restore the old objectivity of the Gospels' meaning. But it does indicate a stronger possibility of recognizing a firmness to their perceived significance; it does prevent a falling apart into complete subjectivity and relativity; and from a Christian perspective in particular, it does attune with the more traditional thought of a trust-sustaining consensus (*sensus communis* = *sensus fidelium*) within which matters of faith and conduct can be discussed and determined.<sup>133</sup>

If we relate this comment to the structuralist and postmodernist rendering of what history is, and recall that Hayden White speaks of an "inexorable relativity in every representation," then we might say that there is one relativity that counts as Christian, a relativity found in the four-fold Gospel witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>134</sup> In fact, in this essay of White wherein he speaks of an inexorable relativity, White contends that there are some past events (and his concern here is the Shoah) that themselves set the parameters of the sort of narrative, or representation, that can be told if one is to retain any sense of integrity with respect to the original events. That is, White comes close to stating that some accounts are truer than others, and the truer ones are those that bring to expression what is found at the deep level of the events. What I would be arguing here is that the events in the life of Jesus can only be represented in a historical Jesus discussion faithfully if they express the deep level of what they were all about. One cannot turn the life of Jesus into a comedy because the data (or facts) do not lend themselves to a comedy; the data, in other words, determine what is truthful in history.

While this observation cannot be developed here, it can be reasonably argued that there is an *inevitability to creedal orthodoxy* in Christian theological formulation because of the formative power of the foundational four-fold narrative about Jesus in the gospels. The genesis of Mark and John, which is no pun, finds its inevitable *telos* in the orthodox creeds of the church. One might plausibly counter that other creeds could have developed alongside those creeds, which is precisely why Protestantism has for five hundred years contended for

<sup>133</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 96.

<sup>134</sup> White, "Historical Emplotment," 27.



*sola scriptura*. But what is plausible to some finds its guiding parameters in the primal narratives of the four-fold witness to Jesus Christ in the New Testament.<sup>135</sup>

I offer now a fourth, but final, observation. If we are dealing with the theological discipline, we are probably dealing with both faith-based seminaries or colleges as well as state-based or university-based schooling. What is expected in one is not expected or even allowed, in the other. We can perhaps, as hedgehogs, cut through the brush with a rather simple observation: to the degree that the school that shapes the curriculum is itself shaped by the two deep traditions about Jesus (the canonical Gospels, the creeds),<sup>136</sup> to the same degree its openness or closedness to other representations of the historical Jesus is determined.

In a university setting where freedom of thought is championed as the one and only creedal statement,<sup>137</sup> there will be almost no restrictions on what a historical Jesus scholar may say and teach about Jesus (except of a conservative nature). In a more ecclesiastically shaped institution, there may well be restrictions, at different levels, on what can be said and taught about Jesus. Institutions of this sort vary on what is permitted and what is not permitted.

My contention is now clear: if a theological curriculum is based on a traditional confession in the narrative depiction of Jesus in the Gospels, or the historic creeds, then the historical Jesus has a distinct but limited role. The historical Jesus scholar's narrative representation of Jesus is of value only insofar as it supplements or supports the grand narrative of Jesus that is found in the Gospels or the creeds. A proposal or representation of Jesus by an individual historical Jesus scholar may have lesser values: showing how we got from the "original Jesus" to the present "canonical Jesus"; offering an apologetic for what the church believes by filtering through non-canonical evidence or other sorts of evidence and arguments; or simply writing out a history of early Christianity in order to explain to students and Christians how things became what they are. Historical Jesus scholarship certainly helps at the level of statement and description—or, in the words of Jimmy Dunn, with "data" and "facts"—and it may help with chronicle, clarification and context, but historical Jesus scholarship helps only to a limited, some would say a very limited, degree with the story or narrative that forms the foundation of Christian theology. What is clear is that

<sup>135</sup> There is plenty to say at this point about Scripture and how Christians are to understand it, but such issues cannot be explored here. I mention three important writers: K. Trembath, *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); J. Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); T. Work, *Living and Active* (Sacra doctrina; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>136</sup> I do not mean to suggest here the Tridentine theory of Scripture *and* tradition as authority. I see the classical creeds as the living, ongoing, even Spirit-led voice of the church coming to terms with what it believes. I see the Scripture as Protestants always have: as the final authority.

<sup>137</sup> This is a leitmotif in the historiography of many, including Jenkins, *Reforming History*, and AJH, *Telling the Truth about History*.

for the person who is committed to the canonical Gospels, or creeds as the church's definitive narrative about Jesus, another narrative about Jesus will not play a faith-determining role. It will not because it cannot. Why? Because, as Robert Morgan says,

The task of this theological discipline is to interpret the canonical witnesses theologically, and so inform the life and thought of the Christian Church.<sup>138</sup>

Perhaps the clearest example of this can be seen in recent New Testament theologies. Georg Strecker begins his NT theology with the theology of Paul, proceeds only then to the early Christian traditions about Jesus in the Gospels, the Synoptic Gospels, and the Johannine School, and then to the literature he judges as part of the early church's movement into the early Catholic church and the Catholic letters.<sup>139</sup> P. Stuhlmacher, on the other hand, begins his two-volume NT theology with *die Verkündigung Jesu* and, as did Joachim Jeremias after tracing out the parameters set by Jesus, orients the theologies of Paul, the synoptic Evangelists, and John and his school within those parameters.<sup>140</sup> While I tend to agree with Stuhlmacher on matters historiographical pertaining to the historical Jesus, both Stuhlmacher and Strecker are struggling with what role historical reconstruction is to play as one sorts out what can only be called a "New Testament theology"—as opposed to "early Christian thought." Again, if both sort out historical questions in wildly different ways, each knows that the ultimate foundation for a normative shaping of theology is conditioned by the story and narrative found in the Gospels. Both are appropriating what can only be called a "Christian" historiography.

The reason for this is clear: theological curricula are shaped by larger bodies, by administrative and church-based boards, and they are shaped to foster students into the faith those bodies confess. The faith of such bodies, in most cases, is the result of two millennia of study of the Bible and the creeds, the result of two millennia of intense theological debate and discussion. It is unlikely, first, that a single historical Jesus scholar will completely change the theological conclusions of either the church or even of a smaller church body. Second, the swirl of ideas that emerges from a wide variety of historical Jesus scholarship makes clear that it is impossible for each of these to be adapted or adopted for use in the life of the church or in the theological curriculum.

In his recent, brilliant magnum opus, Larry Hurtado traces with exacting nuance how the early churches expressed devotion to Christ.<sup>141</sup> The church itself

<sup>138</sup> Morgan, "Historical Jesus," 203.

<sup>139</sup> G. Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (ed. and completed by F.W. Horn; trans. M.E. Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

<sup>140</sup> P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 1997). Dan Bailey is completing his translation of Stuhlmacher, and it will be published by Eerdmans.

<sup>141</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

came from the trajectory Hurtado sorts out. And many historical Jesus studies today would fit within the parameters sketched by Hurtado. Many, also, would not fit. Those narrative representations of Jesus that do not fit into that grid would also not fit into a theological curriculum intent on teaching a traditional understanding of Jesus.

Most theological curricula permit enough freedom of thought for the individual scholar to offer suggestions here and there, and to offer, under the watchful eye of both scholarship and theological context, a new narrative representation of Jesus. It does not surprise that both N.T. Wright and B.D. Chilton serve in the same church body: the church of England and its American family member, the Episcopalian church. Other church bodies would not be so supple, and they have a right to determine their own parameters. Such parameter-making, after all, is an expression of freedom of thought as free as in any scientific discipline that requires its professors and students to learn to explore the world within a set of categories well established by others.

### THE ISSUE OF HISTORICAL JUDGMENT

There are two major moments in the last century of historical Jesus scholarship that deal with the issue of critical judgment.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps I am biased by my own context and readings, but to me the major moments are two scholars: Norman Perrin and E.P. Sanders.<sup>143</sup> The former argued for historical Jesus studies operating as the disciplines of science while the latter argued that historical Jesus studies ought to operate as the disciplines of the humanities. Neither, to my knowledge, put it in these terms, so let me explain.<sup>144</sup>

Perrin argued that method precedes all else, that there are three criteria (*dissimilarity*, *multiple attestation*, and *coherence*) that can be applied to the evidence, and that when the evidence passes through the sieve of these criteria, certain sayings and events survive. It is from these sayings and events that one can discern

<sup>142</sup> The most complete study of the history of this scholarship is Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*. But, see also the survey of S.E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research* (JSNTSup 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000) 28–123.

<sup>143</sup> No one disputes the significance of Ernst Käsemann's running the gauntlet in 1953 when he called the students of Bultmann back to the possibility of ascertaining the historical Jesus and, what was most significant, the positive significance of the historical Jesus for theology. One might replace Norman Perrin's name with Käsemann's, but it is the criteriological priority that gives Perrin an edge for how the discussion has evolved. See E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in his *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W.J. Montague; SBT 41; London: SCM, 1971), 15–47.

<sup>144</sup> Ultimately, of course, this sort of historical judgment owes more to Ernst Troeltsch's penetrating and pioneering essays on the relationship of faith and history, but especially on his famous three criteria: *probability*, *analogy*, and *correlation*. See his "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History* (trans. J.L. Adams and W.F. Bense; intro. J.L. Adams; 1898; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32. On Troeltsch himself, see Hans-Georg Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch* (trans. J. Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

a methodologically sound and historiographically defensible understanding of Jesus. Sanders, on the other hand, while not eschewing the criteriological approach to the Gospels as much as he initially contends, argued that what is needed is not so much a microscopic analysis of individual sayings, collated and then narrated, but a big picture understanding of Jesus as discerned from what he did—through which we gain a view of what Jesus was all about, regardless of the debates about individual sayings and events and details.

Perrin has the most descendants: one thinks of Jeremias (his teacher) who supported him, and then of B.F. Meyer, J.P. Meier, J.D. Crossan, J. Becker, and the Jesus Seminar as led by R.W. Funk. Sanders has fewer descendants, and even those that descend from him, since they operate with a big picture approach, tend to disown their parentage in his methodological discussion. I think here of R.A. Horsley, M. Borg, B.D. Chilton, N.T. Wright, Dale Allison, and (if I may be so bold) my own study on the larger message of Jesus, *A New Vision for Israel*. The most recent spark in this discussion has been generated by Gerd Theissen and his student, Dagmar Winter. Inasmuch as they focus on the criterion of distinguishing Jesus from the early church, they belong in the line of Perrin; but inasmuch as they also focus on the larger picture of Jesus that fits plausibly within Judaism, they belong also in the line of Sanders.<sup>145</sup> As Theissen puts it,

Jesus' singularity consists in a singular combination of Jewish traditions as well as in the fact that his words and deeds represent a unique stage in the development that leads from Judaism to Christianity.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>145</sup> More specifically, Theissen and Winter propose two criteria: *First*, a given factor is authentic if one finds (1) contextual plausibility as well as (2) plausibility of effects in the early church. *Second*, each of these has two subcategories. Beginning with plausibility of effects, they find an indicator of authenticity in any element of the tradition that shows opposition to traditional bias, which is similar to the older method of dissimilarity to, or tension with early-church tendencies. Authenticity is found in coherence of sources, which is similar to the older multiple attestation criterion. Moving back to contextual plausibility, they find an element authentic that is contextually appropriate, which is directly contrary to the older dissimilarity to Judaism criterion—and authenticity is found in a corresponding *contextual distinctiveness*: Jesus must cut his own figure within Judaism. And, to stretching the frequency of how often one can use the term *plausibility*, they propose an overarching *comprehensive historical plausibility*—which is the combination of elements in the life of Jesus that give us a distinctive form of Judaism that then gives rise to the effects we find in the early churches. Thus, contextual plausibility is (1) contextually appropriate and (2) contextually distinctive. Plausibility of effects entails (1) opposition to traditional bias and (2) coherence of sources.

I have two responses to Theissen and Winter: (1) they have corrected the criterion of double dissimilarity but in so doing have taken the second half back too much—they find tension with the early church to be too valuable, and hence they are seeking a Jesus who is too distinctive from the early churches; and (2) they are too unaware of the fundamental insights of postmodernist historiography's emphasis on the significance of the historian's narrative in shaping what we understand about the past. Their tendency is to think if we find something plausible then we have meaning, while the entire construction of the larger metanarrative that makes a contextually plausible Jesus needs to be recognized for what it is: a heuristic model derived at the level of critical realism.

<sup>146</sup> Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, 244.

As I assess the issue, deciding what is authentic cannot be reduced to a science, contra the approach of Perrin and his descendants. Nor is the criterion of dissimilarity all it is purported to be in this scientific tradition. The recent monograph of Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter has laid to rest, permanently, any idea that the criterion is either disinterested, objective historiography or that it can achieve anything like a consensus.<sup>147</sup> In fact, at some levels (not all, thankfully), the criterion of double dissimilarity is a criterion of double prejudice. On the one hand, it is designed to find a Jesus who is contra early Christian orthodoxy (thus, anti-church faith) and, on the other, it is designed to find a Jesus who is contra Judaism (thus, anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism). This is a bald statement of mine that needs nuance, not the least of which is the idea that genuine tensions between Jesus and Judaism or between Jesus and the early church—though it ought to be observed that these are often arguments from silence—can be genuine indicators of authenticity, but the overall thrust of finding a Jesus who is neither very Jewish nor very Christian is a chimera who never existed and who can only be the quest of scholars who have abandoned any notion of disinterestedness in order to find a Jesus of their own making.

Therefore, the criteria proposed by Theissen and Winter—that of a Jesus who is plausibly placed within Judaism and, at the same time, plausibly generative of the later Christian effects—is far closer to a genuine historical approach for studying Jesus than the old-fashioned approach that found its flashpoints in Paul Schmiedel and Rudolf Bultmann, and then in the later disciples of Bultmann (notably Ernst Käsemann). As a sidebar, I add that I am not sure Theissen and Winter’s model is actually a criterion at all. Instead, it is an orientation—for as a method it hardly helps us to see if a given datum is genuine. Did Jesus say the first beatitude? Surely, it is plausible for Jesus the Jew to have said something like this, and it shows sufficient connection with early Christian ethics to be considered authentic. But few would find this argument sufficiently rigorous. However, as a counter to the criterion of double dissimilarity, the proposal of Theissen and Winter is a powerful and direction-turning alternative.

So, again, any method designed to help us “find Jesus” has to be more than some scientific criterion. I think this because human intention, which is what historical Jesus studies are really all about, cannot be reduced to a science. The fundamental problem with the criteriological approach to the sayings and events of Jesus is that they make *formal reason* and even *mechanistic* what is *material reason* or, to use other terms, they turn the *substance* into its *form*. Words cannot be turned into *things*, while it is *things* that can be turned into *form* and into *scientific reason*. Words, and humans who use these words, cannot be reduced to form. One might say that catching a baseball, to invoke my former illustration, is the *form*, but the *substance* can only be discerned by its socio-intentional contexts. To go back to the world of philosophy, the criteriological approach seeks

<sup>147</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. the tracing of its development by Winter, 27–171.

to turn Kant's sense of *judgment* into his senses of either *pure* or *practical reason*.<sup>148</sup>

Having said that, however, I do believe there are occasionally patterns to be discovered in historical judgment. Perrin did not decide, without reason, that multiple attestation, dissimilarity, and coherence are the criteria, and then proceed to the evidence. In fact, as all recognize, Perrin's criteriological approach was indebted heavily to Rudolf Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition* and to Joachim Jeremias's studies on the Aramaic background to the sayings of Jesus. In essence, Perrin's own method is the synthesis of those of Bultmann and Jeremias, and thus his method is the distillation of how other historians were operating with concrete evidence. And I think Perrin's criteria are right. They just aren't right enough. One cannot sort the evidence sufficiently through these three criteria.

Careful study of the evidence, combined as it will be in historical Jesus study with historical judgment, will produce a vast array of logical judgments that cannot be reduced simply to these three. While they may sometimes find an earlier indicator in those three criteria, others will emerge. I take but one example. Stanley Porter has recently argued for a rather minimal new criterion.<sup>149</sup> His argument works like this: if we can assume that Jesus sometimes may have spoken in Greek, then there just may be occasions, when Jesus is dealing with a more Gentile audience, that we find authentic words in Greek. Whatever one thinks of Porter's point, his historical judgment is sound; if, at times, it is the case that Jesus spoke in Greek (and not all scholars agree), then a new criterion has been found. Porter's criterion can be used in Perrin-like fashion or, as I prefer, it can be recognized when historical judgments are being made.

My overall point is this: historical judgment is diverse, revealing itself more often in subtle judgment and overall picture than in a criteriological approach to the sayings and deeds of Jesus. That is, I doubt very much that any historical Jesus scholar actually begins with a *tabula rasa*, puts the criteria on the table, and then asks the evidence to come to judgment; if there is one exception to my doubt, it is the work of J.P. Meier. Instead, most have an overall representation of Jesus in mind and go about looking at evidence and making judgments about what is genuine from what is not genuine and, at times, revising the overall representation. This, so it seems to me, is what critical realism is calling us to do. It is what I see in the works of many historical Jesus scholars, even when they are ultimately contending for a method more in tune with Perrin.

In the end, it is a representation, or a narrative or story about Jesus that compels agreement and disagreement. Rarely, so it seems to me, is it the method that strikes the critic first. Instead, as we read the representation of Jesus—say in Crossan's or Chilton's studies—we either assent or dissent. We do so on the

<sup>148</sup> My inferences here are sparked by Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 11–17.

<sup>149</sup> See Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity*.

basis of whether or not the Jesus represented is like the Jesus we represent him to be in our mind. Postmodernity compels us to think of our work this way. It compels us to do so because this is, after all, how we do work.

In what follows I study how Jesus understood his own death according to such a method. Because the debates about how Jesus understood his death are so numerous and yet the topic so rarely examined “for its own sake” (a tip of my cap to Sir Geoffrey Elton), we need to examine the history of scholarship before we connect the evidence, bit by bit, making historical judgments in order to build a meaning-making narrative of what Jesus was all about and who he was.