

Christopher McMahon's *Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today* . . . is a refreshingly direct Christological overview in which McMahon allows the debates, concerns, and questions not only of scholars but also of the faithful to emerge from the texts and then to be addressed in a balanced and thoughtful manner. . . . McMahon offers crisp summaries, poignant questions for discussion and reflection, helpful charts, and sidebars, which serve as pedagogical tools. The book's open and inclusive approach invites readers from any background or perspective to make the journey and to encounter the richness and impact of Christ's life in the world.

—Shannon Schrein, OSF
Lourdes University
Sylvania, Ohio

With its explanation of the successive quests for “the historical Jesus,” [*Understanding Jesus*] provides a learned and comprehensive antidote to conspiracy claims about Jesus of Nazareth. . . . The author helps students make sense of an often-bewildering array of scholarly voices. . . . Christopher McMahon's accessible prose is supplemented with helpful charts, questions for reflection, topical bibliographies, and a glossary.

—Christopher Denny
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Understanding Jesus

CHRISTOLOGY FROM EMMAUS TO TODAY

CHRISTOPHER MCMAHON



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*To Julie,
in gratitude for your friendship and humble witness to Christ's saving love
(Romans 5:5; Galatians 2:19b–20)*

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

The motivation to offer a revised edition of a textbook can often appear simply to be financial, a means of addressing economic issues on the side of the publishers or the author. Yet, at times, circumstances demand a book be revised, and I hope that readers of this text will appreciate the many reasons for this revision of *Jesus Our Salvation*.

First, the original edition was well received by instructors and students, earning the book praise and numerous course adoptions. Yet, the book was crafted in the early stages of Anselm Academic's foray into the college textbook market, and the precise editorial voice of the press had yet to be established. Moreover, it was my first book, and the combination of these two factors played a role in the shortcomings of the original edition. The opportunity to revise the text in light of my experience and the insights of the experienced editorial team at Anselm could not be ignored. It is my hope that the current edition will preserve the virtues of the first edition, correct any of its errors, and provide both instructors and students with an even more useful tool for engaging the questions surrounding the religious significance of Jesus within the Christian tradition.

Second, the original edition seemed to take an explicitly faith-centered stance on Christology, and many readers thought that it presupposed (or even imposed) a faith stance. Feedback from instructors indicated that this perception hampered the book's usefulness in settings where a significant number of students did not share the same faith traditions or convictions. The new edition seeks to remedy this problem by adopting a "faith friendly" perspective, one that articulates basic Christian and often Catholic convictions on Christology without presupposing these convictions are shared by the reader. The title and design of the book have been changed along with the artwork and the questions for reflection so as to accommodate a wider audience. While no text will please all readers, I believe that the current edition represents a strong and consistent attempt to address this important issue in a balanced way—in a way hospitable to readers representing a wide range of faith convictions.

Third, in this revision I have added some new material and revised much of the original. For example, although many readers appreciated the sidebar discussions, a few sidebars seemed either inordinately long or otherwise distracting. Several such sidebars have been deleted, and others have been revised and

abbreviated. Additionally, the presentation on the various quests for the historical Jesus in chapter 1 has been tightened and incorporated into a discussion of the paradigmatic shift in Christology that has taken place over the course of the past century. The reconstruction of Jesus' life and ministry in chapter 3 has been tightened, and the material on the resurrection of Jesus in chapter 3 has been expanded slightly. The discussion of NT Christology in chapter 4 includes additional material on the provenance and complexities associated with the term *messiah* within late Second Temple Judaism. Additionally, the discussion of soteriology in chapters 6 and 7 has been improved with an expansion of the approach offered by Aquinas and a fuller presentation of Rene Girard's contribution to contemporary soteriology.

This revised edition will, I hope, continue to serve college students with a useable, approachable, and engaging text that will help focus and direct further inquiry into the central claim of the Christian tradition, namely that in Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself. The book takes a theological rather than purely historical or social-scientific approach to Christology. I hope that this theological presentation resonates with both believers and nonbelievers in a way that makes Christian claims about Christ a compelling and fruitful topic for inquiry and discussion.

Contemporary Christology and the Historical Jesus

The Western world, which for more than fifteen hundred years had defined itself in relation to the Christian tradition, is rapidly being redefined, largely by a globalized and distinctly post-Christian culture. Today all religions, and Christianity in particular, struggle to promote the integration of a life of faith with daily economic and political concerns. The broader culture tends to define the values people hold, leaving religious values marginalized or blended and indistinct.

Standing twenty centuries removed from the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Christians struggle to articulate the relevance of his life and the doctrinal statements about him that emerged in the intervening centuries. What remains is often pious religious sentiment or technical theological study, as the claims about Jesus made in the history of Christian theology fade into obscurity. Indeed, the history of theology is in some ways a history of forgetting. This is especially true of the discipline known as “Christology,” i.e., critical reflection on the religious significance of Jesus. Many Christians regard the Christological tradition as irrelevant for contemporary faith, and many choose to ignore it or simply forget it. A number of theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have even attempted to drive out what they regarded as the “demons” of medieval and ancient Christology and its creeds.

Dissatisfaction with what might be called “creedal Christianity”¹ and a cultural move away from organized religion in the West has turned many contemporary Christians away from classic Christology to focus exclusively on the Bible, hoping thus to arrive at a simpler, clearer understanding of Jesus. Such a maneuver has its own problems, however, for how do we know that the Gospels give us a true picture of Jesus? The desire to get behind the canonical Gospels to

1. This phrase will become clearer in the course of this text; for now, it is sufficient to identify “creedal Christianity” with the classic formulations of Christian doctrine that emerged in the course of the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries and resulted in the formulation of the Nicene and Chalcedonian statements of faith.

find the real Jesus—the Jesus whom some claim has been hidden and distorted by the early Christian church—has led to a series of scholarly “quests” to discover who Jesus really was. On a more popular level, the suspicion that the real Jesus was different from the Jesus of the Gospels has found expression in the widely popular book and film *The Da Vinci Code*.

Where does one turn, then, for answers? If the ancient creeds are irrelevant and if the Gospel accounts cannot be trusted—as both Jesus scholars and a skeptical, secular culture seem to insist—what is an ordinary believer to do? One response has been to allow one’s devotional life to become privatized and individualized—insulation, after all, can be comforting. As long as one remains within one’s private devotional life or that of a small group of like-minded people, images or claims about Jesus can remain largely unexamined. Yet, the desire to bridge this gap between faith and understanding has focused the work of theologians in recent years, and these attempts define the landscape of contemporary Christology.

Changing Paradigms and Shifting Terrain

In the past, Christology was a rather straightforward theological discipline. A course on Christology had a mathematical precision to it—one investigated how God became human in Christ, what powers Christ had, and how the death and resurrection of Christ saved humanity. As the reader can probably tell already, the account of Christology offered in these pages will not be so straightforward, for contemporary Christology in general is not straightforward. In fact, most theologians now would begin by discussing how modern times really shifted the terrain or the paradigm for doing Christology (and all theology).

This paradigm shift in the way Christology is done and taught was championed by, among others, the great Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984). Rahner was particularly concerned with how modern Christians had all but forgotten their own Christological teaching, which emphasized both the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus.² Although established at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, by Rahner’s day most Christians paid only lip service to this doctrine, which to the average lay person seemed essentially irrelevant. Rahner believed that the teaching of Chalcedon, and indeed all the classic formulations on Christ, represented both obstacle and opportunity for the renewal of Christology.

The Council of Chalcedon had emphasized the full humanity of Christ along with his full divinity. Nevertheless, all of the early Christological proclamations, Chalcedon included, tended to enshrine a “high descending” approach

2. Karl Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 149–200.

to Christology. The prologue to John's Gospel best illustrates this approach: the Word of God descends from heaven, becomes flesh, is glorified in death, and returns to the Father in heaven. In Christian art, we often see images of the Annunciation represented as a tiny person (often carrying a cross, as in Robert Campin's *Annunciation Triptych*) who flies down from heaven and occupies the womb of the Blessed Mother. Such an approach to Christology tends toward a crude literalism—which may have made perfect sense in the worldview of ancient peoples, but as Rahner argued, it has become perilously out of date and theologically dangerous today.

A high-descending approach has burdened many Christians with a warped and unorthodox Christology that Rahner termed crypto-monophysitism. That is, he accused people of being closet “monophysites”; monophysites—from the Greek words *monos* (one) and *physis* (nature)—were early Christian heretics who believed that Jesus had only one (divine) nature. In effect, Rahner was saying that modern Christians, although verbally affirming the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, actually downplay or forget that Christ was also fully human. This neglect of Jesus' humanity is entirely understandable given the high-descending approach that dominated Christological discourse and popular piety for centuries. Such an approach tended to produce a mythical understanding of Jesus that disconnects him from human experience and history alike—which is not at all what those who framed the creed of Chalcedon had in mind.

Rahner argued for a shift in Christological thinking, away from the high-descending approach to an emphasis on Christ's humanity—a low-ascending approach—as the path to recovery of authentic Christology. Some theologians, however, objected to this move, arguing that a low-ascending approach would diminish the divinity of Christ. Anticipating such an objection, Rahner asserted, “Anyone who takes seriously the historicity [authenticity] of human truth (in which God's truth too has become incarnate in Revelation) must see that neither the abandonment of a [theological] formula nor its preservation in a petrified form does justice to human understanding.”³ Just because one states a doctrine correctly does not mean that one really believes it—i.e., one doesn't necessarily act according to one's stated belief. The mere repetition of Christological doctrines and formulae does not mean that they have been properly understood or adequately appropriated.

When talking about God, something more is always possible, Rahner argued. Therefore, the shift to a low-ascending Christology is not really a challenge to traditional Christology; rather, it is the means by which contemporary Christians do homage to the tradition and renew it.

This book will follow a low-ascending approach. Such an approach will inevitably raise issues that can prove both helpful and problematic for

3. Ibid., 150.

articulating a contemporary Christology that is faithful to the tradition. However, in the end, this approach also positions the discipline of Christology to address the questions and issues raised within the broader culture so that the Christological tradition may be better understood beyond the boundaries of the Christian church.

Interest in a low-ascending Christology has been responsible, in part, for the wave of books, films, and documentaries on Jesus we have seen over the past two decades. Christians have found some of these images of Jesus disconcerting: Jesus as a violent revolutionary, a confused and naïve religious reformer, a magician, and a philosopher. The diverse depictions all purport to offer a view of the person behind the canonical Gospels, the historical human rather than the religious figure proclaimed by the Christian church—which brings us back to the question of “the real Jesus” behind the Gospel accounts. In scholarly terms, this is the question of “the historical Jesus”; the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to it.

The Old Quest: The Challenge of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment provides the basic backdrop against which the so-called old or original quest for the historical Jesus is best understood. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “wars of religion,” sparked by the Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, had swept across Europe; allegedly Christian rulers busily tried to kill one another in the name of Jesus (the wars of religion were, in many ways, not about religion but about political power).⁴ These wars helped to discredit religion and religious authority in Europe. If Christian authorities on either side of a conflict could cite divine sanction for their violent aggression, the logic behind their respective rationale had to be highly selective and self-serving, to say the least.

The discrediting of religion and religious authority prompted many thinkers to look outside religion for answers to questions of reason, truth, and morality. The era of the Enlightenment, which followed, was characterized by a pervasive suspicion of religious claims and religious authority. Instead, the Enlightenment celebrated the work of the individual mind that was free from irrational beliefs and unconstrained by religious authority. The Enlightenment set the stage for the old quest for the historical Jesus that emerged in the nineteenth century by discrediting traditional Christianity and its scriptures.

However, the Enlightenment’s hostility to organized religion provides only one piece of the background necessary for understanding the old quest. The

4. For a provocative and insightful account of these conflicts, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 123–80.

other piece involves the Enlightenment's successor, Romanticism. Whereas the Enlightenment emphasized the cool logic of scientific reason as the sole criterion of truth and value, Romanticism emphasized the emotional, mystical, and more natural aspects of human existence. Like the Enlightenment, Romanticism prized individual experience and was suspicious of organized religion and religious authority. However, Romanticism was much more comfortable creatively engaging traditional Christianity than was the Enlightenment, albeit in a subversive way. Together Romanticism and the Enlightenment, to varying degrees, fueled the major efforts of the old quest.

Looking for Jesus amid Social and Cultural Revolution

The French Revolution (1789) was a watershed in the political, social, and religious life of Europe. The insights and challenges posed by Enlightenment thinkers came to fruition in the French Revolution, with its wholesale rejection of the old order of Europe, including the cultural and political influence of the Christianity. At this time the father of historical Jesus research, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), inaugurated what has come to be known as the old quest for the historical Jesus.

The general indictment of the church that accompanied the French Revolution seems to have played a role in Reimarus's description of the origins of Christianity and the place of Jesus therein. Reimarus suggested that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God stood in contrast to the disciples' emphasis on the person of Jesus and the church. Jesus' ministry, according to Reimarus, was primarily a nationalist religious and political reform movement (much like the French Revolution), while Jesus' disciples, through their preaching and writing, misrepresented Jesus' message for their own purposes. Reimarus concluded that traditional Christianity was, simply stated, a fraud, a deception that an investigation into the life of Jesus behind the Gospels helps to unmask. Such an account of Jesus and the origins of the church further eroded the power of the church while affirming those who sought political and social reform.

The attack on the Christian church as a fraud resonated within many quarters in nineteenth-century Europe, but the profound religious and philosophical sensibilities of the culture also admitted a more nuanced revision of the origins of Christianity, such as that offered by David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874). His major work, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1836), went through several editions during Strauss's lifetime. An admirer of the German philosopher G. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Strauss argued that the Gospels were myth and attempted to communicate a reality that Hegel designated the ideal of "God-manhood." Stated simply, this ideal describes human life lived toward the goal of actualizing the great spiritual orientation of human existence: a union with God. Jesus, therefore, is not the incarnation of God but a sign, or an example,

of what humans might become if they are awakened to the spiritual foundations of their existence. For Strauss, the disciples' desire to communicate the dynamics of a personal encounter with Jesus could only be effective if that communication were evocative—it had to invite people to respond or react in a certain way, rather than merely describe or report the events of Jesus' life. Myth, Strauss argued, was the literary and religious convention early Christian writers used to bring the encounter with Jesus alive and make the realization of God-manhood possible in a way that mere description could not. For Strauss, Christianity was not a fraud but a mistake or a misunderstanding of this basic dynamic, a mistake that could be corrected. This correction, however, required the demise of traditional Christianity but at the same time would create a new, more authentic, and non-dogmatic religion. Around the time of Strauss, a movement emerged within theological circles that sought to find middle ground between the principles of the Enlightenment and traditional Christianity. This position came to be known as liberal theology, and one of its most popular exponents at the turn of the twentieth century was the great historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930).

Liberal theology sought to accommodate the principles of the Enlightenment and Christianity—usually by adopting a thoroughly modern outlook, retaining aspects of traditional Christianity that seemed to fit, and abandoning elements that did not. For example, the miracle stories were given naturalistic and moral interpretations. Jesus' healings had natural explanations, and so-called nature miracles like the feeding of the multitude had moral but not literal significance, e.g., when we share, we find that there is more than enough to go around. In his famous book *What Is Christianity?* (1900), Harnack depicted Jesus as an eminently reasonable human and did away with any hint of the supernatural. The resultant portrait of Jesus and his mission revolved around three central ideas: (1) the kingdom of God as a present interior reality, (2) the infinite value of the human soul, and (3) the law of love as the supreme religious and moral value. For Harnack, Jesus did not point to himself; rather, he directed all people to God as a loving Father. Harnack, like Strauss, rejected the doctrines of traditional Christianity but not on the grounds that the church had misunderstood Jesus. Rather, he argued, Christian doctrines, even those in Scripture, are historically and culturally determined—the product of Greek and other influences—and only of passing value.

Harnack was an important and serious church historian, and he was closely connected to many of the Romantic and “liberal” approaches to the historical Jesus that emerged in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century. These approaches imaginatively narrated the life and ministry of Jesus so that the worldview of Jesus was made to fit with that of modern European intellectuals. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, many began to wonder whether the quest for the historical Jesus was sufficiently self-critical.

The End of the Old Quest: The Limits of Historical Investigations

The old quest was brought to a close through the development of a better understanding of the formation and purpose of the Gospels, and a better (though still imperfect) understanding of first-century Palestinian Judaism and its theology.

For the better part of Christian history, the Gospels were thought to present eyewitness accounts of the life and death of Jesus (particularly the Gospel of Matthew, the “first Gospel”). Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, Mark came to be regarded as the first Gospel, a kind of bare-bones account of Jesus’ life and ministry with few theological accretions. Some circles confidently regarded Mark as a basic, historically reliable account of Jesus’ life, whereas the other Gospels were thought to have comparatively little historical value.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the historicity of Mark came under fire in the work of William Wrede (1859–1906), who suggested that even Mark’s Gospel was suffused with the theology of the early church. Wrede claimed that one example of this was the so-called messianic secret material in Mark. The messianic secret refers to passages in Mark in which those who have witnessed Jesus’ divine power (e.g., in a healing or exorcism) are instructed not to tell others of Jesus’ identity as the divine agent (Mark 1:40–45; 5:21–24, 35–43; 7:31–37; 8:22–26). Wrede claimed that early Christians had come to believe that Jesus became the Messiah after his death (the development of New Testament Christologies will be discussed in chapter 4). As beliefs regarding Jesus’ divinity developed, Jesus’ identity as Messiah was read back into the stories about his ministry, but this created a tension—was Jesus the Messiah before or only after his death? According to Wrede, Mark’s community resolved this tension by creating the messianic secret: Jesus was the Messiah during his life, but he hid his identity and revealed it only after his resurrection. This feature of Mark’s Gospel was but one example of how later concerns and developments within early Christianity came to dominate the proclamation of the gospel. For Wrede, the Gospels were excellent sources for the study of earliest Christianity but poor sources for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

Criticism of the actual history of the Gospels was also fueled by the emergence of a more sophisticated account of first-century Judaism and its theology. Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) put another nail in the coffin of the uncritical assumptions of the old quest with his book *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (1892). Weiss argued that one may indeed gain some knowledge of the historical Jesus by reading the Gospels, but the picture that emerges makes Jesus irrelevant to modern humans because his message and his actions all revolve around an ancient understanding of the world and God. Weiss claimed that Jesus’ preaching and ministry was informed by first-century Jewish apocalypticism, or more precisely, apocalyptic eschatology.

Apocalyptic eschatology, which flourished from the second century BCE to the second century CE, expressed particularly Jewish and Christian perspectives about the coming of the end of the world. The term refers to a theological genre of literature as well as a theological movement. This eschatology (from the Greek *eschaton*, “end”) was blended with ideas from Persia and Greece and came to focus on the idea that God would shortly intervene in history, raise the dead, give both the wicked and righteous their just rewards, and reestablish Israel as an independent kingdom ruled by God. Apocalyptic eschatology usually involved the communication of this message or “revelation” (Greek, *apocalypsis*) of hope to a persecuted community through the work of an intermediary—an angel or a famous figure from the history of Israel. Needless to say, if Weiss was correct about the basic content and meaning of Jesus’ ministry and self-understanding, then the entire project of liberal theology would be undercut. In fact, the entire historical Jesus quest would be irrelevant, because the resulting picture of Jesus would not be useful for modern people.

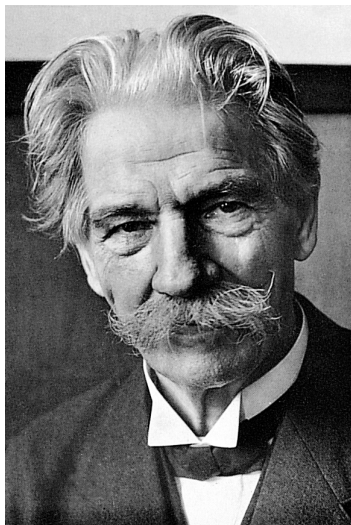
Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), notable composer, physician, medical doctor, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and theologian, brought the old quest for the historical Jesus to a halt in 1906 with the publication of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. In this book, Schweitzer traced the progress and aberrations of the various attempts to discover the historical Jesus in the nineteenth century. Schweitzer seconded George Tyrrell’s famous image of historical Jesus research at the time: such research is like looking down a dark well—one sees only one’s reflection. In other words, the political philosopher and revolutionary see Jesus as a revolutionary, the Hegelian philosopher sees Jesus as a Hegelian philosopher, and the humanist sees Jesus as a humanist. Schweitzer’s position was similar to the thoroughgoing eschatology of Johannes Weiss. Schweitzer contended that the Jesus of history was so thoroughly immersed in the situation of first-century Palestine and its concern with eschatology that any attempt to bring him into the modern period does so only through violence and distortion. The historical Jesus is alien to modern ways of thinking.

In his account of the progress of the old quest for the historical Jesus, William Loewe identified four major positions at the end of the nineteenth century:⁵ (1) the historical Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospels (the position of fundamentalists or reactionaries), (2) the historical Jesus is the Jesus of philosophers and humanists (liberal theologians), (3) the historical Jesus cannot be reconstructed from the Gospels (Wrede), and (4) the historical Jesus is freakish and irrelevant to our time (Weiss and Schweitzer). Within academic circles in Europe, positions three and four carry the day, but positions one and two enjoy significant popularity. The result of this division between academics and the broader culture

5. William P. Loewe, *The College Student’s Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 31–32.

was the general acceptance of the position outlined in Martin Kähler's book *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (actually published before Schweitzer's book). For Kähler, the "historical" (*geschichtlich* in German) Jesus cannot be identified as the object of faith; rather, it is the Christ proclaimed at Easter that is the object of proclamation and belief, and it is this "historic" (*historisch* in German) Jesus who makes a difference in history. Kähler's distinction between the historical person and the Christ of the faith community would be influential over the next several decades.

Person of Interest: Albert Schweitzer



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Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was one of the most important figures within twentieth-century Western culture. His family was deeply religious as well as musically and academically inclined, which helped to chart Albert's future. His greatness first manifested itself in Albert's musical abilities: he was nine when he first performed at his father's church in Strasbourg. Schweitzer's musical interest continued unabated to the end of his life—he wasn't just good; he was internationally renowned. His performances and musical publications made him wealthy, and as a young man, he used his financial resources to further his education. Initially, Schweitzer studied theology at the

University of Strasbourg where he completed his doctorate in philosophy (1899). He also received a licentiate in theology a year later. He served as a pastor and professor over the next decade, during which he wrote several important books, including his celebrated account of the old quest for the historical Jesus (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906). Around the same time, Schweitzer decided to go to Africa as a medical missionary and proceeded to earn a medical degree in 1913. He founded a hospital at Lambaréné in French Equatorial Africa, which he would operate until his death in 1965. The hospital could serve as many as five hundred patients at its height, and Schweitzer had multiple roles there: physician, surgeon, pastor, administrator, and janitor. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

Beyond the Question of the Historical Jesus

Few figures have dominated theological debates as did Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Bultmann, a Lutheran, helped to move theology away from the seemingly intractable situation created by the demise of liberal theology and the old quest to locate an authentic religious expression of Christianity within a modern context. The movement became known as *dialectical theology*. Dialectical theology did not share with liberal theology its optimism regarding human history and progress; rather, God was understood as entirely “other”—apart from the world—and such a position carries some important implications for the study of the historical Jesus. Bultmann denied the theological significance of the historical Jesus beyond the mere fact of his existence (*das Dass*). The fact of Jesus’ existence was simply the precondition for the proclamation of the early church. Bultmann was concerned instead with historical issues surrounding the formation of the Gospels, in particular a method known as form criticism. He and other form critics (especially Martin Debelius) sought to deconstruct the Gospels into individual units to determine the original life setting of the early church in which these units took shape. By doing this Bultmann hoped to discern the manner in which the early church came to understand and communicate its faith in Christ. Armed with this knowledge, the contingencies that formed much of the New Testament could be relativized or dismissed in a project of demythologizing. For Bultmann, as for Kähler, it is the proclamation of Jesus risen and now living (i.e., the Jesus of the kerygma) that has import for believers. Bultmann outlined the main features of his theology and his approach to historical Jesus research in his famous essay on demythologizing the New Testament.⁶

For Bultmann, the New Testament presents a mythical worldview and a corresponding mythical view of salvation. The New Testament assumes that the world is a three-story structure (heaven is “up there,” earth is “here,” and hell is “down there”); the course of human history is governed by spiritual powers; salvation occurs as a result of the God-man’s atoning sacrifice and the victory this gives him over the powers of evil; anyone who belongs to the Christian community is guaranteed resurrection. For Bultmann, a modern person cannot appropriate this primitive, unscientific worldview, which has its roots in the mythology of either first-century Judaism or that of the Greco-Roman world. Christians cannot accept this worldview because (1) there is nothing specifically Christian about this worldview, and (2) no one can appropriate this worldview today in light of modern culture and science. More important for Bultmann, however, is the way self-understanding helps to shape the modern worldview, and this has great implications for a contemporary understanding of salvation.

6. Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; German original published in 1941).

Demythologizing does not imply a cafeteria approach to Christianity—taking what fits with our modern worldview and leaving behind ideas or doctrines that do not conform to modern sensibilities. Rather, Bultmann insists, “We can only accept the mythical world picture or completely reject it.”⁷ He contends that the mythic picture of the New Testament will be done away with as one uncovers the real intention of the New Testament and its use of myth. For Bultmann, myth is to be understood not in cosmological terms but in anthropological terms. It gives expression to the “beyond” or the limit of human existence that lies beyond the familiar disposable world that one takes for granted. In other words, myth must be understood as disclosing the mystery of human existence (what it means to be human).

This approach to the Christian gospel is not altogether novel, according to Bultmann; rather, the task of demythologizing is already undertaken in the New Testament itself.⁸ Earlier attempts at demythologizing the New Testament were offered in the nineteenth century, most notably by Strauss and by some within liberal theology. These attempts, however, failed to understand the kerygma (the faith proclamation of the church). The modern world requires an existential interpretation of the New Testament myths, an interpretation that will speak to the difficulties of human existence in the modern world.

The understanding of “being” that underlies the Christian kerygma contrasts existence (or “human being”) *with* faith and *without* faith. The human being outside faith—one who lives “according to the flesh”—is subject to the impermanence and decay associated with the world. However, in faith, humans live “according to the Spirit” because their lives are based on what cannot be seen and what is not disposable. For Bultmann, the eschatology usually associated with Jewish apocalypticism is now to be read as the new life of the believer, a new creation, free from the trouble of this transitory and disposable world.

Bultmann contends that this discovery is dependent upon the New Testament. The revelation that takes place in Christ is the revelation of the love of God. This love frees one from one’s self and opens one to freedom and future possibility. Christian faith recognizes the act of God in Christ as the condition for the possibility of human love and authenticity. That is why, for Bultmann, the significance of the Christ occurrence rests not in historical questions but in discerning what God wants to say to humanity in the proclamation of Christ.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 11. “The New Testament itself invites this kind of criticism. Not only are there rough edges in its mythology, but some of its features are actually contradictory. For example, the death of Christ is sometimes a sacrifice and sometimes a cosmic event. Sometimes his person is interpreted as the Messiah and sometimes as the Second Adam. The *kenōsis* of the preexistent Son (Philippians 2:6ff.) is incompatible with the miracle narratives as proofs of his messianic claims. The virgin birth is inconsistent with the assertion of his preexistence. The doctrine of the Creation is incompatible with the conception of the ‘rulers of this world’ (1 Corinthians 2:6ff.), the ‘god of this world’ (2 Corinthians 4:4) and the ‘elements of this world’ (Galatians 4:3). It is impossible to square the belief that the law was given by God with the theory that it comes from the angels (Galatians 3:19f).”

The cross of Christ is to be understood not as an occurrence outside of oneself and one's world; rather, the meaning of the cross is found in the lives of believers who commit to the suffering that authentic freedom demands.

The project of demythologizing the New Testament preserves the paradox (apparent contradiction) of the Christian faith: the transcendent God—the God that is totally beyond us—becomes present in the concrete history and lives of people. Bultmann's project, though criticized during his lifetime, was eminently pastoral (rather than simply academic) as it tried to outline how Christians are to believe.

The Historical Jesus at the Turn of the Last Century

At the close of the nineteenth century, the quest for the historical Jesus had all but come to an end in one of four major positions on the historical Jesus.

The Historical Jesus Is the Jesus of the Gospels

For many Christians, the rise of biblical criticism in the wake of the Enlightenment seemed obviously contrary to the spirit of Christianity; they responded by rejecting any separation between Jesus in the Gospels and accounts of the historical Jesus. Many Christians today continue to find such distinctions troubling because they seem to cast doubt on the truthfulness of the Gospels.

The Historical Jesus Is the Jesus of Philosophers and Humanists

Not all Christians viewed the contributions of the Enlightenment, and the modern world in general, as destructive. Liberal theology saw the Enlightenment as an opportunity to formulate a new understanding of Christianity. Liberal theology worked tirelessly to construct a positive account of Jesus as the ultimate humanist and philosopher rather than the incarnate Son of God.

The Historical Jesus Cannot Be Reconstructed from the Gospels

William Wrede denied that the Gospels could serve as a source for uncovering the life and ministry of Jesus. Wrede saw the Gospels as good resources for understanding the early church, which created the Gospels to help it deal with its own particular situation. Christians, therefore, are left without any sure historical resource for their faith.

The Historical Jesus Is Freakish and Irrelevant

Weiss and Schweitzer both attacked the supposition of liberal theology that Jesus could best be understood through an appeal to modern ideas. Rather, Weiss and Schweitzer emphasized that Jesus was a unique individual who was a product of a first-century Jewish worldview: Jesus thought that the world was coming to an end in the fiery and dramatic advent of God. His crucifixion was, therefore, a failure, a last desperate attempt to force God to act.

The Quest Gets Baptized

The dismissal of the historical Jesus from the scope of theology was difficult for many to accept, even some of those who closely supported Bultmann's overall project. Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998), one of Bultmann's former students, launched the new quest for the historical Jesus when he challenged Bultmann's position on the historical Jesus.

Käsemann respected the basic theological insights of Bultmann and sympathized with Bultmann's dissatisfaction with liberal theology and the old quest. Though Bultmann's concern to present a thoroughly modern yet Lutheran approach to the gospel succeeded in many ways for Käsemann, his denial of the theological significance of historical Jesus research came dangerously close to embracing the early heresy known as Docetism. Docetism (from the Greek verb *dokeō*, meaning "to think" or "to seem") denied the reality of the Incarnation, saying instead that Jesus only "seemed" or appeared to be human, but because he was divine, he could never be a real (material) human. Käsemann argued that the denial of the theological significance of historical Jesus research in favor of the kerygma was almost the same as denying the Incarnation.

The second and third points on which Käsemann criticized Bultmann are directly related. First, Käsemann argued, Bultmann fails to deal with the fact that the kerygma of the early church developed into the narratives of Jesus' life and ministry today called the Gospels. This happened, Käsemann argued (his third point), because the earliest Christians wanted to make the explicit connection between the faith to which the kerygma calls Christians and the life of the human Jesus that was the basis for the kerygma. These points combine to argue that the quest for the historical Jesus, contrary to Bultmann's assertion, was not only possible but also theologically necessary.

From Bultmann's students, few full-length works on the life and ministry of Jesus emerged, with the notable exception of Günther Bornkam's *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was widely read and influential for almost two decades. Among Roman Catholics, however, historical Jesus research quickly became a focal point of Christological reflection. One of the most prominent and influential books released was *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, a two-volume study by the Dutch Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009). Schillebeeckx offered readers an outline of what historians can reasonably assert about Jesus, a critically assured minimum of information on this historical figure. This initial sketch focused on the words of Jesus and his association with the marginalized and suffering. From this point, Schillebeeckx reflected upon the development of Christology in the New Testament. The "experience" (an important concept in Schillebeeckx's theology) of the early disciples provides the basis for their subsequent proclamations about Jesus' identity as Messiah. Because of this, Schillebeeckx has been accused of blending his historical reconstruction of Jesus with his own theology, the theology

of experience. This is a common accusation raised against the entire new quest: it aims to uncover the unique personality of Jesus and, thereby, gain an understanding of how Christian faith emerged from the personal encounter with Jesus. In other words, there seems to be a theological agenda that controls the historical reconstruction of Jesus. Taking due note of these criticisms, the new quest, nonetheless, rescued historical Jesus research as an integral part of contemporary Christian faith, while failing to define precisely the place of historical Jesus research within contemporary Christology.

The British scholar and Anglican bishop N. T. Wright coined the expression “third quest” to describe the wave of Jesus research that took place from the mid-1980s to today. Generally, several new features distinguish this wave of Jesus research from the earlier quests, but some of the concerns of a previous generation of scholarship persist. For example, the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars and other interested individuals, have produced a series of works that seem, in many ways, to continue the old quest’s objective of using historical Jesus research to attack traditional forms of Christianity. John P. Meier, however, argues that the third quest for the historical Jesus represents a significant departure from previous quests. He identifies seven notable gains that define the third quest:⁹

1. The third quest has an ecumenical and international character (whereas earlier quests were almost exclusively male, German, and Protestant).
2. It clarifies the question of reliable sources (the New Testament is viewed as the primary source for research, and other texts and artifacts like the apocryphal gospels or the Dead Sea Scrolls are only secondary sources).
3. It draws upon a more accurate picture of first-century Judaism (as opposed to the tendency in previous quests simply to contrast Jesus and first-century Judaism).
4. It employs new insights from archeology, philology, and sociology.
5. It clarifies the application of criteria of historicity (i.e., unlike previous quests it consistently and carefully applies certain criteria for sifting the New Testament and other sources for historically reliable material).
6. It gives proper attention to the miracle tradition (as opposed to the previous quests, which relegated the miracle tradition to the status of legend or myth).
7. It takes the Jewishness of Jesus with utter seriousness (Jesus is understood as a first-century Jew).

The two most important of these unique features of the third quest—the Jewish background of Jesus (items 3 and 7) and the use of criteria (5)—deserve further comment.

9. John P. Meier, “The Present State of the ‘Third Quest’ for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain,” *Biblica* 80 (1999): 459–87.

Following World War II and the Holocaust, Christians have come to acknowledge that their understanding of Judaism, especially the Judaism of the first century, has been slanted and incomplete. For example, in the old and new quests, and in Bultmann's theology, Judaism served as a foil for the presentation of Jesus. First-century Judaism was portrayed as petty, materialistic, and oriented toward earning salvation from God through good works. This is a caricature of Judaism rather than a historically and theologically responsible portrait. The work of E. P. Sanders in the 1970s revolutionized Christian scholarly descriptions of first-century Judaism, which subsequently became much more sophisticated and sympathetic. Additionally, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of first-century Jewish sectarian texts, underscored the picture of first-century Judaism as diverse and, therefore, less authoritarian. These factors help to situate Jesus within Judaism as a faithful or perhaps prophetic critic, someone on the margins but nonetheless recognizable as a first-century Palestinian Jew.

Meier also zealously defends the use of criteria in historical Jesus research. In his voluminous treatment of the historical Jesus, *A Marginal Jew*, Meier often insists that whether we affirm or deny the historicity of a particular story from the New Testament, we must know why we do so. In fact, for Meier the greatest contribution of the third quest may be its historical autonomy. History guides the quest, not theology:

It is only in the light of this rigorous application of historical standards that one comes to see what was wrong with so much of the first and second quests. All too often, the first and second quests were theological projects masquerading as historical projects. Now, there is nothing wrong with a historically informed theology or Christology; indeed, they are to be welcomed and fostered. But a Christology that seeks to profit from historical research into Jesus is not the same thing and must be carefully distinguished from a purely empirical, historical quest for Jesus that prescind from or brackets what is known by faith. This is not to betray faith. . . . Let the *historical* Jesus be a truly and solely *historical* reconstruction, with all the lacunae and truncations of the total reality that a purely historical inquiry into a marginal figure of ancient history will inevitably involve. After the purely historical project is finished, there will be more than enough time to ask about correlations with Christian faith and academic Christology. ("The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 [1999]: 459–87, 463)

In short, Meier's concern is to defend the idea, rooted in the goals of the new quest, that historical Jesus research is primarily an academic project that can defend the reasonableness of Christian faith. Yet Meier's concerns about the historical integrity of Jesus research emanates from his frustration with the way liberation theologians in particular (including both Latin American and feminist

theologians) have understood the nature of historical inquiry and the use of historical Jesus research.¹⁰ Meier suggests that liberation theologians have traveled down a “primrose path” that equates the historical Jesus with the real Jesus “and then elevates *that* Jesus to the canon within the canon.”¹¹ In doing so, Meier claims that liberation theologians neglect the complexity and limitations of historical Jesus research and confuse historical Jesus research with Christology.

Christianity and Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that flourished in the middle part of the twentieth century and that rejected classical philosophy and its insistence upon abstractions such as “essence.” The famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defined *existentialism* in the following maxim: “existence precedes essence.” In other words, humans are thrown into the world, “thrown towards death” to use Martin Heidegger’s expression, without any definition or foundation to guide them. According to existentialism, one is forced to wrestle with one’s own existence and through the exercise of will, responsibly create one’s essence. Such a project no doubt explains why humans are so anxious—consumed by the desire to possess and control, under the illusion that the one who controls or owns the most “wins.”

While some of the most famous existentialists were atheists (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus) the movement had its roots in the work of the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard († 1855). Kierkegaard, deeply dissatisfied with the modern emphasis on science and a corresponding concern with universals in accounts of human existence, emphasized the problems of individual existence. Gabriel Marcel, a twentieth-century existentialist philosopher, framed the issue simply: the primary task of human life is not to have or control but to be or become. Such an outlook transcends the scientific emphasis of the modern world without rejecting its advances. Thus, the modern world is neither vilified nor glorified.

Both founders of dialectical theology (Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann) appealed to the thought of Kierkegaard, though Bultmann was well acquainted with the thought of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger as well. For dialectical theology, existentialism helped to move Christianity away from liberal theology’s problematic embrace of modernity and the dangerous idea of “progress.” Existentialism helped to emphasize the precarious position of the human person and the need to abandon oneself to God in an outrageous leap of faith. As such, existentialism helped to reinforce the Reformation’s emphasis on salvation as a gift that cannot be earned.

10. See, John P. Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 43 (1988): 1–14.

11. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

The Problem of History: Understanding the Limits and Value of History

In the mid-1980s, Elizabeth Johnson, then at the Catholic University of America, and David Tracy, a professor at the University of Chicago, debated the question of the theological relevance of historical Jesus research.¹² Johnson maintains that a critically assured minimum of knowledge about the historical Jesus can be obtained through historical research. This basic set of data can then be cast into a particular interpretive mold or framework, and can yield multiple Christologies given the particular sets of concerns or locations of the theologian. Johnson also emphasized the theological necessity of the historical Jesus as “the memory image” by which the church and the tradition have always referred to a reality that predates the church. Even though the historical Jesus is the product of modern historical research—no one was asking questions about the historical Jesus in the Middle Ages—it still functions as the symbol that mediates the reality of God’s saving activity. A sketch of the historical Jesus can provide necessary content for Christian faith and can also test competing representations of Jesus. For example, if one’s historical sketch of Jesus conclusively proved that Jesus prohibited violence, then images of Christ, or Christologies, that portray Christ as a warrior could be rightly criticized as inconsistent with the historical Jesus.

Johnson also asserted that historical Jesus research functions as a norm or foundation for Christology—a claim that has proven contentious. In 2000, William Loewe challenged those who would argue for the normative value of historical Jesus research.¹³ He concluded that while there has been a shift to historical Jesus studies in contemporary Christology, this shift has significant limits, perhaps the most obvious being its provisional character—such research is always open to revision. What historians and biblical scholars affirm about Jesus in one decade may have to be revised significantly in the next decade in light of a new archaeological find, a previously neglected piece of data, or a more precise and encompassing theory. Additionally, there seems to be less and less consensus concerning what one can affirm of the historical Jesus. For instance, while John Meier concludes that “the Twelve” (the twelve disciples) was a feature of Jesus’ own ministry, John Dominic Crossan contends that it is a creation of the early church and runs counter to Jesus’ practice of inclusive discipleship: Jesus treated everyone as equals and would not have privileged one group over others. This lack of consensus among scholars, therefore, challenges the naïve assumption that there is one established account of *the* historical Jesus and compromises any talk of historical Jesus research as normative.

12. See Elizabeth Johnson, “The Theological Relevance of the Historical Jesus: A Debate and a Thesis,” *Thomist* 48 (1984): 1–43. Johnson’s position has developed considerably in the past twenty years.

13. William P. Loewe, “From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 314–31.

Modernism among Catholics and Protestants

The panic that had taken hold of the Christian church in the nineteenth century amid the spirit of revolution and the rise of secularism peaked at the dawn of the twentieth century. In Roman Catholic circles, Pope Pius X (1903–1914) led the fight against modern culture. Under his leadership, the social, political, and philosophical spirit of the nineteenth century were condemned under the term *Modernism*. Although there was no official movement that labeled itself *Modernism*, Pius X, in essence, created a “heresy” out of a pastiche of the cultural and intellectual tendencies of the day that included the following:

- A critical view of Scripture based on history and comparative literature
- A rejection of scholasticism (i.e., medieval theology) and its account of the harmony between faith and reason in favor of emphasizing religious feeling or sentiment
- Emphasis on the complete autonomy of the natural and human sciences
- A teleological view of history that privileges the revelatory character of an event in its consequences rather than in its origins

According to officials in Rome, Modernism had infiltrated the Catholic Church, and several prominent intellectuals were accused of supporting the movement (e.g., Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell). In his 1907 encyclical letter, “On the Doctrines of the Modernists” (*Pascendi dominici gregis*), Pius X helped to establish some of the most rigid controls on theological activity in Church history. Censorship, monitoring, and reporting of suspected Modernists were encouraged and even demanded in the encyclical. Supplementing it was “The Oath against Modernism” that was required of all clergy, religious, and seminary professors.

Yet, at the same time, a theological renaissance was emerging in the wake of the cultivation of a distinctively Christian philosophy emerging from a renewed interest in medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. This revival, though sponsored by Rome to combat secularized education and secularized accounts of reason, would eventually promote a historical consciousness about theology as well as scripture study, culminating in the critical embrace of modern culture and an historical critical approach to the Bible at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

In the early twentieth century, many Protestant Christians reacted similarly to challenges to biblical authority. Across confessional lines, conservatives began to impose limits on seminary faculty and to cultivate suspicion. The Presbyterian Church particularly showed this tension, as rivals at the conservative Princeton Theological Seminary and the modernist Union Theological Seminary helped to divide the denomination, a divide mirrored in American Protestant churches and culminating in the divide between “mainline” and “evangelical” churches. Many Protestant Christians in the United States began to articulate the plenary (i.e., full or complete) inerrancy of the Bible in all matters as a way of insulating it against the claims of historical scholarship, an affirmation that became the hallmark of evangelical churches.

Loewe concluded that the historical Jesus cannot be the ground of either Christian faith or Christology. Rather, historical Jesus research helps Christology to move away from an ahistorical, metaphysical approach, characteristic of those who would simply take the Scriptures at face value or repeat the formulas of church councils and old catechisms. Instead, historical Jesus research enables one, in part, to focus on a historical and genetic account of the Christological tradition. By enabling one to get a sense of Jesus as a historical figure, one can more fully appreciate the dynamics of his ministry. In turn, a historical sketch of Jesus' ministry may help one to understand why and how the earliest Christians came to believe that this human being, Jesus, was God's own self-expression to the world, God's agent for conquering sin and evil. In this way, historical Jesus research helps one to offer constructive statements on Christology and its contemporary significance. However, this importance must not be overestimated, for historical Jesus research is not the foundation or norm of Christian faith.

The third quest has opened up the possibility for more fruitful historical research through its attentiveness to more precise criteria, its concern for the Jewish background of Jesus, and its ecumenical or interdenominational character (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and non-religious scholars working together). Yet these improvements in methodology and in the diversity of scholars engaged in the field have not yielded more stable results. In fact, the results are arguably more confused than ever. Perhaps the third quest's lasting contribution is a sense of humility, regarding both the results of this research and its theological significance.

Some theologians have gone so far as to question the validity of any so-called quest for the historical Jesus. Instead, they argue for the fundamental reliability of the canonical Gospels for understanding Jesus, and they eschew the criteria and formulae proffered by scholars. One notable example of this approach has been Pope Benedict XVI, who authored a three-volume work on the life of Jesus. Although the work takes advantage of the work of scholars such as John Meier and Joachim Gnilka among others, the pope offers something more in the nature of a Christological treatise, unconcerned with recent developments in historical Jesus research.

Conclusion

The quest for the historical Jesus has consumed vast amounts of ink, paper, and bytes over the last two centuries. Those who want to attack traditional forms of Christianity have appealed to the historical Jesus for vindication, while defenders of the faith have also appealed to these historical reconstructions to support their cause. It would appear, however, that both sides in the debate are asking too much of historical Jesus research. Bultmann was indeed correct when he warned

against pursuing historical Jesus research in order to prove Christian faith, but his abandonment of the quest was problematic for the Christian understanding of the Incarnation—“the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). William Loewe, along with much of the theological community, concludes that historical Jesus research has value in that it provides contemporary theology with important insights and moves away from mythological understandings of the New Testament, but it is limited in that Christian faith does not rest on a historical reconstruction. In other words, Christians do not put their faith into a critical sketch offered by historians. Historical research on Jesus is legitimate and constructive, but its results are not normative. As the great churchman and theologian John Henry Cardinal Newman said, “History is not a creed or a catechism; it gives lessons rather than rules. . . . Bold outlines and broad masses of color rise out of the records of the past. They may be dim, they may be incomplete; but they are definite.”¹⁴

Questions for Understanding

1. What were the defining concerns of the old quest?
2. Why did the old quest end?
3. What was the major contribution of Albert Schweitzer to the quest for the historical Jesus?
4. Why did Rudolf Bultmann reject the quest for the historical Jesus?
What place does his project of demythologizing have in his theology?
5. On what grounds did Ernst Käsemann challenge Bultmann on the historical Jesus?
6. Describe three defining characteristics of the third quest.
7. Contrast the positions of Elizabeth Johnson and William Loewe on the theological significance of historical Jesus research.

Questions for Reflection

1. Can we overcome George Tyrrell’s parable about historical Jesus research?
If so, how?
2. What do you think about the notion of “myth” used in this chapter?
Given that David Friedrich Strauss used myth positively and Rudolf Bultmann used it negatively, what is the place of the concept in the study of the New Testament?

14. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (various editions), Introduction, n. 5.

3. If historians reached a consensus and determined that Jesus offered a definitive teaching, would this teaching be binding for contemporary Christians? Why or why not? What is the connection between the history of Jesus and the Christian faith?

For Further Reading

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