The Jesus Quest & The Real Jesus

Faith and History

The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth. By Ben Witherington III. *InterVarsity. 250 pp. $19.99.*

The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels. By Luke Timothy Johnson. *Harper San Francisco. 192 pp. $22.*

Reviewed by Richard B. Hays

As the «historical Jesus» debate heats up and more participants enter the fray, the general reader may understandably feel bewildered by the claims and counterclaims being bandied about. Ben Witherington's book *The Jesus Quest* provides a program to clarify the issues and identify the players.

It is generally agreed that the outburst of studies on Jesus and his historical setting since about 1980 may be characterized as «the third quest» for the historical Jesus. The first quest encompassed the various nineteenth-century efforts to write «lives» of Jesus as a great religious personality: Albert Schweitzer's devastating 1906 book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* administered the critical coup de grace to such efforts. Subsequently, the form-critical methods that dominated gospel studies during the first half of the twentieth century shifted attention away from the Jesus of history and onto the early communities that shaped and transmitted the traditions behind the canonical Gospels.

During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a brief resurgence of interest in the problem, described by James M. Robinson as *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*. This movement, emerging from the theological legacy of Rudolf Bultmann, sought to identify the «understanding of existence» that came to expression in Jesus' teaching. Though the «New Quest» produced one major synthetic study (Gunter Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*) that served as a text for a generation of students, its representation of Jesus as an existentialist theologian was historically implausible-tending to ignore the concrete historical setting of Jesus' activity and, regrettably, to play Jesus off against the Judaism of his own time.

By the end of the 1960s the new quest had petered out. However, in light of new archaeological finds, fundamental scholarly reassessments of first-century Judaism, and the development of new approaches to the social history of the first century, we have seen in the past fifteen years a proliferation of new attempts to «recover» Jesus as a figure of the historical past. Such attempts are wildly divergent in method and results, but they may be loosely grouped together under the rubric of «the third quest.» Witherington-

Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary and himself the author of two books on the historical Jesus (*The Christology of Jesus* [1990] and *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* [1994])-believes that these studies have produced some important results, and his aim is to survey critically the major contributions to the discussion.

After a useful opening chapter detailing the results of recent research on the social, political, and religious environment of Galilee in the first century, Witherington summarizes the work of numerous scholars in seven chapters organized according to various controlling images of Jesus that have emerged from this research: «Jesus the Talking Head» (The Jesus Seminar), «Jesus the Itinerant Cynic Philosopher» (John Dominic Crossan), «Jesus, Man of the Spirit» (Marcus Borg and Geza Vermes), «Jesus the Eschatological Prophet» (E. P. Sanders), «Jesus the Prophet of Social Change» (Gerd Theissen and Richard A. Horsley), «Jesus the Sage: The Wisdom of God» (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Witherington himself), and «Jesus: Marginal Jew or Jewish Messiah?» (John Meier and others).

Witherington's account of these studies is generally irenic, pointing out the evidence on which the various reconstructions are based and noting their valid insights. At the same time, however, his survey has a definite critical edge. Witherington's own stance is conservative in the sense that he believes that the canonical Gospels preserve reliable memories of what Jesus did and said; indeed, he believes that we can recover from these texts the self-interpretation of the historical man. Thus, Witherington does not hesitate to offer criticisms of positions with which he disagrees. (Indeed, he has the rhetorically disconcerting habit of citing his own opinion-or even his subjective reaction-as the final court of appeal in disputed matters, e.g., «Frankly, I find Sanders' discussion of miracles, like Crossan's, rather frustrating.»)

Readers who do not share Witherington's confidence in the evidential value of the gospel narratives will sometimes find his critiques circular or beside the point; occasionally, as in his response to Marcus Borg, one finds Witherington rebutting historical arguments with theological assertions. Nonetheless, many of his critiques are well- informed and on target, and his outline of the various positions provides a useful overview of the debate. This is certainly the best available account of the diverse reconstructions of Jesus promulgated during the «third quest.»

Witherington's own proposal-that Jesus of Nazareth understood himself as the embodiment of the Wisdom of God-has not attracted widespread assent among New Testament scholars. Witherington argues that this supposition best integrates the data available to us in the gospel traditions. A more persuasive hypothesis, however, is that the traces of wisdom Christology in the Gospels represent one facet of the Christian community's interpretation of the significance of Jesus after the resurrection; it is a telling fact that the occasional representations of Christ as divine Wisdom in the Pauline epistles never appeal to traditions of Jesus' own teaching to support this remarkable claim. There is no doubt that Jesus as a teacher drew upon Wisdom motifs and traditions, but it is a very long step indeed to make the further claim that Jesus understood himself to

be Wisdom incarnate. Sanders' portrayal of Jesus as a Jewish eschatological prophet has more historical plausibility than Witherington's hypothesis.

If Witherington aims at providing an evenhanded sketch of the historical Jesus debate, Luke Johnson's book, as its title suggests, is unabashedly polemical. Johnson, the Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University, is convinced that much of the recent literature about Jesus is pure hokum. It is, on the most charitable reading, poor scholarship; at worst, it is cynical manipulation of the media and the public. The two opening chapters of the book set forth an expose of what Johnson calls «the Jesus business.» Much of this is hilarious reading, as Johnson skewers the silly and pretentious declarations of the Jesus Seminar and of authors such as Barbara Thiering, John Shelby Spong, and A. N. Wilson. (Witherington rightly judges that such books are not worthy of mention in his survey.) Johnson also trains his guns on some of the more academic participants in this enterprise: Borg, Crossan, and Burton Mack. All of this, however, merely sets the stage for the substantive argument of Johnson's book.

In his third chapter, «Cultural Confusion and Collusion,» Johnson contends that the foolishness chronicled in the first two chapters is symptomatic of a cultural malaise that has corrupted our understanding of the category of «history» and created chaos in church and academy alike. Chapter four sets forth an account of the character and limitations of historical knowledge and offers a brief but masterful survey of the way in which appeals to «history» have operated in New Testament scholarship over the past two hundred years.

The fifth chapter of Johnson's book then offers a constructive sketch of the available historical evidence about Jesus. This sketch is noteworthy for its careful use of evidence from the New Testament epistles, for its contention that all the available evidence, including extracanonical material, points towards a consistent narrative pattern focused on Jesus' death, and for its sophisticated argument that the resurrection, though «real,» cannot be considered an historical event. Throughout the early chapters, the reader is offered a rare gift: the distillation of a master teacher's extensive reflections on these issues. It is an intellectually powerful argument, concisely and compellingly articulated. Anyone who wants to understand the big picture of the role of biblical scholarship in church and society should read and ponder these chapters.

The central thesis of Johnson's work, however, comes clearly into focus only in the final chapter: «the real Jesus» is not a Jesus reconstructed by historians but the living Lord who is experienced in the worship and activity of the Church. Johnson argues that the New Testament writings consistently bear witness that the identity of Jesus is definitively expressed in his obedience «even unto death on a cross» for the sake of the salvation of the world. Consequently, «the real Jesus» is «also the one who through the Spirit replicates in the lives of believers faithful obedience to God and loving service to others.»

All of this is gracefully and persuasively argued, but precisely with regard to this final chapter certain questions about Johnson's position must be raised, and certain major points of conflict with Witherington's work noted. Is the question of the Jesus of history

actually as irrelevant to Christian faith as Johnson seems to suggest, and can we place as much reliance on our own experience of the Risen Christ as his argument requires?

Many of the New Testament texts themselves suggest that referential claims about historical events are integral to the biblical kerygma (e.g., Luke 1:1-4, 1 Corinthians 15:1-19). Indeed, the doctrine of the Incarnation requires Christians to affirm that Jesus was an historical man, whose life is open to historical inquiry. Furthermore, New Testament eschatology requires us to retain some reservation about the fullness or adequacy of any «experience» of the Risen Christ: we hope for what we do not yet see. Johnson's rapturous account of the powerful presence of Christ in the Church surely requires some critical controls. (He is acutely conscious of the limitations of historical knowledge but surprisingly oblivious to the limitations of experiential knowledge.) One such control is a careful and reverent examination of the evidence concerning the Jesus of history. That is why Witherington says, «Journeying toward Jesus involves more than just having a deeper relationship with the living Christ of faith, the exalted Lord in heaven. It means being committed to historical inquiry, to studying the life of Jesus in its first-century setting.»

There is the nub of the issue. Johnson tends to place history and religious truth in separate compartments and to insist that historical inquiry is only marginally relevant for the witness of the Church. Witherington, on the other hand, thinks that the truth of the gospel may be at stake in historical questions. The difference is not only theological in character but also epistemological: it turns on different notions of what is meant by «history.» Johnson is far more careful and explicit in his treatment of such issues than Witherington, but his position seems to reinforce the disastrous post-Kantian split between faith and history.

The gospel is a proclamation that certain events *happened* among flesh-and-blood people in history and these events have somehow wrought a fundamental transformation in our relationship to God. That is why the canonical Gospels take the form they do: they are not timeless teachings, not mystical revelations from heaven, not celebrations of the author's own personal relationship with Jesus, but history-like narratives. Thus, while Witherington's confidence in our ability to «read» the history behind the narratives may be excessive, his theological intuition is to be affirmed. There is something at stake in what we can discover about the Jesus of history.

Amidst the glut of trendy mass-marketed Jesus books, these two works by Witherington and Johnson stand out as worthy of attention. Both represent solid historical scholarship done from theologically serious perspectives. Witherington offers a sober report on recent research, whereas Johnson engages the reader in a more wide-ranging reflection about the relation between history, tradition, and faith. The juxtaposition of these two works poses stimulating questions for anyone who wants to ponder more deeply the theological significance of the quest for the historical Jesus.

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