

THE
MODERN
SEARCH
FOR THE
REAL
JESUS

AN INTRODUCTORY ■
SURVEY OF THE ■
HISTORICAL ROOTS ■
OF GOSPELS CRITICISM

ROBERT B. STRIMPLE

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*An Introductory Survey of the
Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism*

ROBERT B. STRIMPLE


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Preface

EVANGELICAL SEMINARY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS, like all Christians, usually come to the study of the Gospels with the desire to “jump right in” and get started immediately with the positive, constructive analysis of the rich revelation of the Savior given to us in the first four books of the New Testament canon. Their teachers recognize, however, that the significance of much that they will ask their students to consider in their study of the Gospels, and much that will be referred to in the most important readings they will assign, will not be understood unless their students have at least a basic acquaintance with the history of Gospels study, especially since the rise of so-called “Gospels criticism” some two hundred years ago.

The purpose of this slim volume is precisely to meet that need: to provide a concise, introductory survey of the most significant scholars and movements that have shaped the critical study of the Gospels in modern times.

For seminary or college classes, such an overview may be a helpful reading assignment as background for class discussion that is full enough to be profitable without being so time-consuming as to preclude the positive study of the inspired Scriptures that is so necessary for those preparing to minister the Word of God in the power of the Spirit to the salvation and edification of God’s people.

For those serious students of the Bible who are not enrolled in a formal academic program, this volume can serve the same purpose of providing a helpful historical orientation to the contemporary study of the Gospels.

Stating the purpose of this study immediately indicates what its purpose is *not*. This brief volume cannot present a fully developed doctrine of the nature, inspiration, and authority of the Bible, and more particularly of the Gospels; nor can it offer a constructive exegetical and hermeneutical methodology harmonious with that view of the Bible as an alternative to the historical-critical methods surveyed here. Some pointers in that direction can be offered along the way, but at least a second volume would be required to accomplish that positive purpose.

My preparation of this volume is the result of my being asked to teach the historical section of the Gospels course at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. From a look at the vast literature available in this field, it might appear as though virtually every leading New Testament scholar has attempted his own review of the history of Gospels criticism—as well as several systematic theologians!—and thus that there is no need for another. Upon further examination, however, I was able to find none that met the requirement of being both reasonably brief and also theologically attuned to the Bible's own teaching regarding its truthfulness and absolute authority. Thus finding nothing satisfactory to assign as a textbook, I turned to the notes I had taken many years ago in a class taught by Ned B. Stonehouse at Westminster Seminary. There I found both the overall outline and many of the theological insights that form the backbone of this study. Most of the strengths and none of the weaknesses of this volume must be attributed to Professor Stonehouse.

Three colleagues who deserve special thanks with regard to this project are Allen Mawhinney, of Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando; Dan McCartney, of Westminster Theological Seminary (in Philadelphia); and Dennis Johnson, of Westminster Theological Seminary in California. And in the preparation of this volume, as in every area of my life for some forty years now, the love of Alice, the precious “wife of my youth” (Mal. 2:14), has been my never-failing encouragement.

Introduction

CHRISTIANS WHO APPROACH a systematic study of the Gospels eager to receive blessing from this portion of the written Word of God often express great impatience with having to devote at least some attention to the main milestones in the two-hundred-year history of what has been called “the science of Gospels criticism.” “Why should a Bible-believing Christian be concerned with Gospels *criticism* at all?” they often ask.

Well, one answer seems clear: the Christian who has no knowledge of contemporary criticism of the Gospels, or of the historical roots of that criticism, is cut off entirely, not only from the world of New Testament scholarship, but also from understanding much that appears in the popular press with regard to the gospel records. Educated laypersons who read those popular articles—for example, the long *Time* magazine cover story that accompanied a review of the controversial movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (in the September 15, 1988, issue)—have a host of troubling questions raised in their minds and often look to their pastor or other trusted Christian leader for answers.

Over a period of six years recently, many have followed with interest the newspaper reports on the progress of the “Jesus Seminar.”

The members of this seminar were two hundred so-called mainline New Testament scholars from throughout the United States. Groups met twice each year from 1985 to 1991 to consider carefully each of the approximately five hundred sayings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Their goal was to determine which of those sayings actually go back to Jesus himself and which were later “put into his mouth,” so to speak, by church tradition or the gospel writers.

What seemed especially to catch the attention of many was the seminar’s method of reaching its conclusions. After each saying was considered, a ballot box was passed around the table, and each participant dropped in a colored bead: red for “yes, Jesus probably said that,” pink for “possibly, maybe Jesus said that,” gray for “no, Jesus was unlikely to have said that,” or black for “no, Jesus certainly would never have said that.” The results of this seminar are now in and are being published by Polebridge Press as the Jesus Seminar Series, edited by Robert W. Funk and others. The first three volumes are *The Parables of Jesus Red Letter Edition* (1988), *The Gospel of Mark Red Letter Edition* (1991), and *Five Gospels, One Jesus* (1992) (the fifth gospel being the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*). In each of these volumes, the sayings attributed to Jesus are printed in red, pink, gray, or black to indicate how likely (or unlikely) it is that the attribution to Jesus is really correct. The headline of the *Los Angeles Times* report (March 4, 1991) of the final seminar session read: “Seminar Rules Out 80% of Words Attributed to Jesus.”

Christians read such a report in their daily newspaper and ask: “What in the world is going on here? How can such scholars have such confidence that they know so much better than the gospel writers themselves what Jesus *really* said?!” Even our brief survey in this book of the history of Gospels criticism will enable the reader to tell anyone who raises such a question what criteria for judgment those seminar members were using and why, and to suggest how valid those criteria really are.

The fact is that most contemporary biblical scholars, both Protestant and Roman Catholic,¹ simply assume that those reading their

¹The openness of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship to modern historical-critical methods is usually dated from Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*,

books or listening to their lectures are familiar with at least the highlights of the history of Gospels criticism. You cannot understand very well what they have to say unless you have some familiarity with the matters reviewed in these chapters.

“So what?” you might say, “I don’t want to read those critical scholars anyway!” Well, they are worth reading because—although I shall grant that you will often have to chew your way through what seems to be a large amount of indigestible chaff to find it—critical biblical studies have produced much that is of great importance for enriching our interpretation of the Scriptures. Virtually all Bible students today make grateful use of the findings regarding the authentic text of the Scriptures, the languages in which they were written, and the original religious, social, and historical contexts to which they were addressed. And the critical study of the Gospels in particular has yielded some important insights into their nature and teaching. As we shall stress again in a moment, literary criticism is simply the careful engagement of the student with the actual texts under consideration. When those texts are the inspired Scriptures, such careful scrutiny is bound to yield fruitful results.

And just as it is true that without an awareness of the history of Gospels criticism we shall not be able to learn well from those who assume such an awareness, so also is it true that without such knowledge we shall not be able to speak effectively about the teaching of the Gospels to those who are acquainted with that history, whether professional scholars or well-educated laymen.

which stressed, for the first time in an official document of the Roman Catholic magisterium, the need for biblical criticism, as well as the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its intent and purpose, and of paying heed to the literary genera of the various biblical texts.

The second turning point in official Roman Catholic acceptance of Roman Catholic biblical criticism is often thought to be the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1964 *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. This document is available in Latin with an English translation in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26 (July 1964): 305–12. By contemporary Protestant standards, it may still seem quite conservative.

The third significant official document is the Second Vatican Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, available in English in Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966). Note especially the instructive footnote 31 on p. 119.

I recall at this point the lecture delivered at the first plenary session of the 1988 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, held in Toronto to consider “The Sources of Theology.” In characteristic Roman Catholic fashion, various “sources” were to be considered: history, experience, authoritative church teaching, world religions, natural sciences. Certainly the Bible was not accepted as the only divinely authoritative source for theology (*sola Scriptura*). The topic of the first lecture, however, was to be the Bible as a source, thus implying perhaps a certain primacy for Scripture. Therefore, this Protestant attended that lecture with special interest.

It turned out, however, to be a rather surprising lecture. Certainly it would have seemed most amazing to any unsuspecting fundamentalist in the audience, because it consisted of a sustained attack by John P. Meier of the Catholic University of America on Latin American liberation theology—but not from the angle an evangelical Protestant or traditionalist Roman Catholic would have expected. Professor Meier cited the influential liberation theologians Jon Sobrino and Juan Luis Segundo as prime examples of how not to use the Bible as a source for theology, because of the way in which they appealed to the message and praxis of “the historical Jesus” in support of their distinctive theology. Meier’s fundamental premise was that “the *real* Jesus . . . is no longer accessible to us by scholarly means,”² and his basic criticism of Sobrino and Segundo was that they were simplistic and naive in their use of the Gospels as “proof-texts” for their theology.

The point I want to make here, by way of illustrating the need to be knowledgeable of the assumptions and methods of the most popular forms of contemporary Gospels criticism, is that for Sobrino and Segundo to “reach” Meier (assuming that they would be willing to expend some time and effort in an attempt to influence him), they would have to show why they consider themselves on good exegetical grounds in assuming the historicity of the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels, and why his radical historical skepticism is unwarranted. The evangelical Protestant trying to reach Meier would have to do that also,

²John P. Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Forty-third Annual Convention*, ed. George Kilcourse, 43 (1988): 6.

and then would have to go on to show exegetically that the Jesus presented in the Gospels actually accords with the Jesus of evangelical Christology rather than with the Jesus of liberation Christology.

If you are content to “live and work and have your being” in the narrow world of those who already submit fully and unquestioningly to the historicity of the Gospels, you may well find the study of Gospels criticism not worth the effort. But if you desire to carry the gospel message to the unbelieving world, including the world of those who know something about the history of the study of the Gospels during the past two hundred years, you yourself cannot be ignorant of that history.

What exactly are we talking about when we speak of “Gospels criticism”? Well, from one point of view, of course, “criticism” is something in which every Christian must engage in every area of his or her life, because in general terms *criticism* may be defined simply as “the act of making judgments, analysis, and evaluation.” And this is an activity which the Scriptures themselves commend to believers—and even command of them. Just think of those New Testament texts in which the Greek verb *dokimazo* (“examine, test, prove, approve”) appears:

1 Thessalonians 5:19–21: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. *Test* everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”

Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to *test and approve* what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

1 John 4:1: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but *test* the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

Philippians 1:10: “. . . so that you may *be able to discern* what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.”

Or think of a text like 1 Corinthians 2:14–15, which speaks of the natural person not being able to understand or discern the things of the Spirit of God, but which says that the spiritual person “makes judg-

ments about all things.” The Greek verb there translated “makes judgments about” is from the root *krino* (from which our English word “critical” comes), meaning “to judge, to distinguish.” If that is what it means to be “critical,” there can be no objection to such activity in general. The Christian is to make intelligent, ethical, spiritual judgments.

And with regard to biblical criticism in particular, because the Bible is a literary product (though one, the Christian believes, of a unique character as “breathed out” by God³), a production by human authors and therefore completely human throughout (though completely divine throughout also, since those authors “were carried along by the Holy Spirit”⁴ to write only what God willed to be written), the Bible may also be, indeed must be, the object of proper “criticism,” that is, thorough examination and analysis—and, yes, judgments with regard to many textual, linguistic, literary, and historical questions. The proper goal of biblical criticism is to be completely open to the biblical text and to all it has to teach us. Such earnest study of the biblical text is bound to have profitable results.

As our historical survey will demonstrate, however, the biblical critic always comes to his or her criticism with certain fundamental presuppositions. And there’s the rub (as our British friends might put it), because—and here is an important historical fact never to be forgotten—Gospel criticism as a literary science came into being as a child of the Enlightenment, the German *Aufklärung*, the philosophical product in the mid-eighteenth century of the earlier English deism and French rationalism.

Immanuel Kant (who, Stephen Neill suggests, “has perhaps a stronger claim than Descartes to be the founder and creator of modern philosophy”⁵) defined the Enlightenment as the release of man’s reasoning from all external authority. Its keynote was the principle of human autonomy. Thus, no historical testimony (including the Bible) may be recognized as possessing inherent authority. Van Harvey ex-

³2 Tim. 3:16, literally translated.

⁴2 Peter 1:21.

⁵Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 2.

presses the principle pointedly: “The historian *confers* authority upon a witness . . . and he makes this judgment only after he has subjected the so-called witness to a rigorous cross-examination.”⁶

In an essay written almost a century after Kant’s death,⁷ Ernst Troeltsch provided a definitive summary of the three primary principles that have guided the historical criticism spawned by the Enlightenment: (1) *The principle of methodological doubt*. All historical judgments (including those made concerning the events reported in the Bible) can only be statements of probability, which are always open to revision. They can never be regarded as absolutely true. (2) *The principle of analogy*. All historical events are, in principle (in “quality”) similar. Thus, “present experience and occurrence become the criteria of probability in the past.”⁸ The result with regard to our judgments regarding the factuality of miracles recorded in the Bible, when “Jewish and Christian history are thus made analogous to all other history,”⁹ is obvious. In our present experience, ax heads do not float, nor do five loaves and two fish suffice to feed five thousand people. (3) *The principle of correlation*. All historical phenomena exist in a chain of cause and effect, and therefore are mutually interrelated and interdependent. There is no effect without an adequate and sufficient cause.

The Kantian philosophical roots of these basic methodological principles, and how they eliminate from consideration *a priori* the truth claims of Christianity and the possibility of revelation, miracles, or any direct divine activity in human history, should be clear.

It is interesting to note in passing how 2 Peter 3 pictures the scoffers in the last days mocking the promise of Christ’s return on the basis of the principle of analogy, Troeltsch’s second principle, the so-called uniformitarian principle. Verse 4 reads: “They will say, ‘Where

⁶Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 42.

⁷Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898),” in *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32. Edgar Krentz (see the following footnote) notes that this “essay still haunts theology” and that “the modern German discussion is still dominated by the shadow of Troeltsch” (pp. 55, 83).

⁸Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 55.

⁹Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 14.

is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” Note well the apostle’s response by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He rejects both the scoffers’ premise (by affirming the fact of God’s judgment in the Flood) and their conclusion, and he thereby rejects that principle of human autonomy which lies at the heart of post-Enlightenment historical criticism—the setting up of man and his present experience as the criterion of what can and cannot happen in history.

Obviously the student of the Gospels and of Gospels criticism must be concerned to study the gospel texts carefully and to refute false arguments, which do not do justice to the actual texts themselves. The student should not become so absorbed in what the critic says about particular texts, however, that he forgets those all-important fundamental presuppositions which the modern “Troeltschian” critic brings to every biblical text. This will become increasingly clear as we review what has often been called “the quest of the historical Jesus.”

The history of Gospels criticism is often referred to by that phrase, the title of the English translation of Albert Schweitzer’s classic treatment of Gospels study up to the first decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, that history is often outlined in terms of three primary phases: the Old Quest, the end of the quest, and the New Quest.

What are scholars seeking (“questing after”) when they search for the “historical” Jesus? They are seeking the *real* Jesus of history. It is assumed that our conception of the real Jesus must be one that accords with the naturalistic, relativistic worldview summarized by Ernst Troeltsch. The Absolute cannot be an object of historical study. The Eternal cannot break through into time. To its disciples, the essential service of the Enlightenment consisted in the banishment of the supernatural from history.

Schweitzer insists that the Reformers made no attempt to return to the historical Jesus, in spite of their advances in the historico-grammatical exegesis of Scripture, because they were still committed to the orthodox Christ affirmed by the Chalcedonian Creed (two natures in one person). He explains:

This dogma [that Christ is the God-man] had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus,

before they could even grasp the thought of His existence. That the historic Jesus is something different from the Jesus Christ of the doctrine of the Two Natures seems to us now self-evident.¹⁰

In other words—note it well—the starting point of the modern quest of the historical Jesus is the assumption that the Jesus presented in our biblical gospels is not the Jesus of history. This is the starting point, not the conclusion reached by a “neutral,” objective, scientific historical investigation. This so-called historical quest is in actuality an attempt to desupernaturalize the only Jesus to whom we possess historical witnesses.

Where shall we look to discover such a nonsupernatural Jesus? In what historical sources shall we find him? Clearly such a Jesus is not to be found anywhere in the entire biblical record. As B. B. Warfield notes, in an important essay on “The Historical Christ,” “It is the desupernaturalized Jesus which is the mythical Jesus, who never had any existence, the postulation of the existence of whom explains nothing and leaves the whole historical development hanging in the air.”¹¹

C. S. Lewis’s wily demon, Screwtape, makes the same point in writing to his nephew, Wormwood:

You will find that a good many Christian-political writers think that Christianity began going wrong, and departing from the doctrine of its Founder, at a very early stage. Now this idea must be used by us to encourage once again the conception of a “historical Jesus” to be found by clearing away later “accretions and perversions” and then to be contrasted with the whole Christian tradition. In the last generation we promoted the construction of such a “historical Jesus” on liberal and humanitarian lines; we are now putting forward a new “historical Jesus” on Marxian, catastrophic, and revolutionary lines. The advantages of these constructions, which we intend to change every thirty years or so, are manifold. In the first place they all tend to direct men’s devotion to something which does not exist, for each “historical Jesus” is unhistorical. The documents say what they say and

¹⁰Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery, 2d ed. (1911; reprint, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1945), 3–4.

¹¹Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 22.

cannot be added to; each new “historical Jesus” therefore has to be got out of them by suppression at one point and exaggeration at another, and by that sort of guessing (*brilliant* is the adjective we teach humans to apply to it) on which no one would risk ten shillings in ordinary life. . . . The “Historical Jesus” then . . . is always to be encouraged.¹²

Since no strand of the entire literary tradition reveals this “historical” (read “nonsupernatural”) Jesus, we must somehow “get behind” the whole written record to find him.

Schweitzer is more candid than most New Testament scholars in acknowledging the role necessarily played in this activity by what Screwtape labels “brilliant guessing.” Schweitzer affirms that “every ordinary method of historical investigation proves inadequate to the complexity” of this study, and therefore he concludes that “the guiding principle must ultimately rest upon historical intuition.” Schweitzer speaks of the difficulty caused by the fact that there are often “yawning gaps” in the gospel accounts. He asks how those gaps are to be filled in, and he answers that they are to be filled by the use of “historical imagination.”¹³

Another difficulty noted by Schweitzer is that “the sources give no hint of the character of [Jesus’] self-consciousness.” Here again he concludes, “For the form of the Messianic self-consciousness of Jesus we have to fall back upon conjecture.”¹⁴ We see, therefore, that it is with good reason that Warfield comments, “In the process of such criticism it is pure subjectivity which rules, and the investigator gets out as results only what he puts in as premises.”¹⁵

Most scholars would naturally conceive of such subjectivity as something to be avoided in a scientific, historical investigation, but Schweitzer sees it quite differently. His frank suggestion is that “historical experiment must here take the place of historical research.” In that experimentation, “it is not the most orderly narratives, those which

¹²C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 116–19.

¹³Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 6–7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 7, 9.

¹⁵Warfield, *Person and Work of Christ*, 21.

weave in conscientiously every detail of the text, which have advanced the study of the subject, but precisely the eccentric ones, those that take the greatest liberties with the text.”¹⁶

Against this background we are now ready to trace the main currents of the history of Gospels criticism.

At this point the reader may be asking, “Why is it that this study, the so-called quest of the historical Jesus, has seemed to grip the imagination of modern men and women the way it has?” The answer seems to be two-sided. On the one hand, as we have already emphasized, modern, post-Enlightenment readers of the Gospels have not been willing to accept and follow the supernatural Jesus presented there. On the other hand, however, they often have not been ready simply to reject Jesus and do without him altogether. They find the religious role claimed for Jesus by Jesus himself, and by the writers of the New Testament, uncongenial to their naturalistic mind-set, and yet they find it hard to cut off all religious relationship with Jesus. Therefore, they seek to find a new one, one compatible with their unbiblical worldview.

As Geerhardus Vos has pointed out, however, such an accommodation is impossible.

No one who prizes the name of Christian can dismiss Jesus absolutely from his field of religious vision; there is always some category of pre-eminence or leadership under which He is classified. . . . [But if] it be once established that Jesus meant to be that specific kind of spiritual helper which by historical right we designate as “the Messiah,” then how can one refuse his help in that very capacity, and force upon Him a role of religious helpfulness which He was not conscious of sustaining?¹⁷

¹⁶Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 9.

¹⁷Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-disclosure of Jesus*, ed. Johannes G. Vos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 14, 16.

**PART ONE:
THE OLD QUEST**

Rationalistic Criticism

THE TERM *RATIONALISM*, when used in a broad, general sense, refers to any viewpoint that assigns a primary role to human reason. More specifically, however, *rationalism* refers to that philosophy which arose in seventeenth-century Europe with the writings of such thinkers as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz. According to this philosophy, reason is the source of truth, and reason—not sensory experience—is the sole criterion of truth. That which is not “rational”—that is, that which my mind cannot see as truth—may not be believed.

Out of this philosophical rationalism, deism developed, first in England and then in France, as well as in the American colonies. The very titles of the earliest deistic works indicate this movement’s concern to present a rational Christianity, a religious faith not offensive to human reason: for example, *Christianity Not Mystrious*, by John Toland (1696), and *Christianity as Old as Creation, or, the Gospel as a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, by Matthew Tyndal (1730). Aiming for a natural, rational simplicity, deism set forth just three primary tenets: (1) There is one supreme God, who is to be worshiped. (2) The human soul is immortal. (3) Virtue and morality are the sum and substance of religion.

The rationalists decided that the life of Jesus could not have contained anything supernatural or unique. Indeed, they denied that the history of Jesus has any significance for religion at all. Only his teaching is of value, and even that is of only relative, not unique, value. Jesus stood for truth—but not, of course, a truth known and revealed by him alone. By definition, that which is true is that which may be known by every rational person who reasons correctly.

1. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768)

The original (German) title of Albert Schweitzer's classic study (in English, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) was *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*. When Joachim Jeremias says that the date of the birth of the so-called problem of the historical Jesus "can be precisely fixed at 1778,"¹ he has in mind the publication in 1778 of the most important essay written by the same German professor with whom Schweitzer began his survey.

Hermann Samuel Reimarus was a professor of Oriental languages at Hamburg Academic Gymnasium, and during his lifetime he was, as far as the public knew, simply a rather colorless representative of deism. In 1754 he published an exposition of deism, but though it went through six editions in German and was translated into Dutch, English, and French, it was a rather bland treatise and did not contain any bitter polemic against Christianity. Indeed, it claimed to be an apology for religion, rather than an attack upon it. Reimarus warned that the materialistic outlook was on the rise, and he called on all religious persons to present a common spiritual front against it.²

Reimarus had written another treatise, however, which he was not bold enough to publish during his lifetime. This was discovered in the library at Wolfenbüttel after his death, and excerpts of it were published by Gotthold Lessing between 1774 and 1778 as "The Wolfenbüttel Fragments." The most important "fragment" was pub-

¹Joachim Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 3.

²This is a call often repeated today. "Christianity must abandon its exclusiveness and join with the best of other religions against materialism and irreligion."

lished in 1778 and was entitled “Concerning the Aims of Jesus and His Disciples.”³

In this essay, Reimarus argued that there was a fundamental difference in purpose between Jesus and Christianity. Jesus himself could be understood quite well in terms of his contemporary Jewish environment and thought world without introducing any supernatural elements. Jesus conceived of the kingdom simply in political terms. Reimarus argued that since Jesus never explained what he meant by the kingdom, he must have believed that his concept of the kingdom did not need explanation because it was the same as that of his Jewish hearers. Thus, he expected to be understood by his hearers in terms of their normal messianic expectation, which was the expectation of a political deliverer from Roman domination.⁴ Jesus announced the coming of this kingdom and intimated that he himself was to be a leader in it. His ethics and his fundamental religious concepts were simply those of Judaism. No break with Judaism was contemplated.

But Jesus was an utter failure. Twice in his ministry he thought his program was about to be realized. The first time was when he sent out the Twelve on their preaching and healing mission. At that point, Jesus’ optimism was so high that he could confidently announce, “I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23).⁵ The second time when Jesus had high hopes that victory was near was when he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This “playing to the crowd,” and

³In Ralph S. Fraser’s translation, *Reimarus: Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), this essay is entitled “Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching.” Into it is incorporated another fragment, entitled “On the Resurrection Narratives,” which claims that the accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels are full of contradictions.

⁴The same basic argument was later presented by Schweitzer, as well as by dispensationalists in support of their “postponement theory”—but in both of these later positions the Jewish messianic expectation was understood to contain supernatural elements.

⁵Later we shall find Schweitzer laying great weight on the same text, along with Matt. 16:28 and 26:64. Clearly, these texts call for careful study in the positive exposition of Matthew’s Gospel. Although such study falls outside the bounds of our historical survey, we will simply observe that the Evangelist himself obviously did not consider Jesus’ statement recorded in 10:23 to have been a failed prophecy.

especially the ensuing violent cleansing of the temple by Jesus, provoked a bitter backlash from the religious establishment, which soon led to his arrest and crucifixion. When he entered Jerusalem, Jesus hoped to rally the people to his side. But by week's end, his ultimate sense of failure was expressed by his cry from the cross, "It is finished!"

Clearly, neither the historical career nor the central teaching of such a man can be made the foundation of a rational religion. Reimarus's purpose in writing this essay—to show that Jesus of Nazareth has no role to play in modern religious faith—would seem, therefore, to have been accomplished. However, this question still cried out for an answer: How did Christianity ever arise on such a historical foundation? Reimarus responded that the Christian religion was established by fraud on the part of Jesus' disciples.⁶ The disciples were not prepared to accept failure. They had been counting on success. They had come to enjoy the prominence, financial security, and ease of their life with Jesus, and they wanted to perpetuate such a life. Preaching was certainly an easier vocation than fishing or any other job they had known! After some fast thinking, their message was radically readjusted. They hit upon the idea of preaching that Jesus had been resurrected. They stole his body from the grave and waited fifty days to proclaim his resurrection, so that if the body should be found, it would be unrecognizable. Then they introduced the idea of a second coming of the resurrected Messiah and reinterpreted the purpose of the Messiah's first coming in spiritual and ethical terms. All the doctrines of the Christian faith were invented by Jesus' disciples and other power-hungry theologians who followed them.

Schweitzer offers the curious opinion that "hate as well as love can write a Life of Jesus, and the greatest of them are written with hate: that of Reimarus . . . and that of . . . Strauss."⁷ As we have already indicated, however, Reimarus thought that by discrediting Christian-

⁶Reimarus also suggested that Jesus himself had been involved in fraud at certain points in his ministry. Jesus and his disciples together had staged certain "miracles," such as the raising of Lazarus, in order to "prove" that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

⁷Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery, 2d ed. (1911; reprint, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1945), 4.

ity—the leading supernatural religion of revelation—he achieved the positive purpose of commending a natural religion of reason.

As we have noted, Reimarus is credited with initiating the modern search for the historical Jesus, the “real” Jesus behind the gospel accounts. His lasting significance is that he raised certain questions that have remained in the forefront of Gospels criticism: (1) What was Jesus’ own view (often referred to as his “consciousness”) of his messiahship? (2) How significant was the eschatological perspective (that is, his emphasis on the coming of God’s kingdom and his role in it) in Jesus’ own thought? (3) What is the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the church’s faith? Or, to put it another way, who was the real founder of Christianity, Jesus or the apostles?

Reimarus’s own explanation of the origin of Christianity, however, is a museum piece today, with no defenders. Harvey McArthur points out what he regards as “the most obvious absurdity” in Reimarus’s reconstruction of the beginnings of Christianity:

If the apostles deliberately and consciously transformed the message of Jesus into something totally other than that which it had been originally, how does it happen that the same group of apostles, and those associated with them, perpetuated an untransformed version of the ministry of Jesus, that is to say, the version which has come down to us in the Gospels? . . . [I]f the transformation was the result of a conscious and planned deception why did those same deceivers refute themselves by perpetuating the untransformed tradition alongside of the transformed?⁸

Equally absurd is Reimarus’s explanation of the resurrection message that gave birth to the church. It is inconceivable that the very apostles who allegedly faked Jesus’ resurrection and cynically proclaimed it as true would later gladly lay down their lives for what they knew to be a monstrous lie. This is the key point to which orthodox Christian apologists like B. B. Warfield return again and again: if the real Jesus cannot have been the Jesus of the gospel records, we are left with no reasonable explanation for the origin of the Christian church.⁹

⁸Harvey K. McArthur, *The Quest Through the Centuries* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 106.

⁹See footnote 11 on p. 9, above.

2. H. E. G. Paulus (1761–1851)

The second German professor whom we shall briefly consider is often cited as the most typical representative of the thoroughgoing rationalist approach to Christianity that was so popular at the end of the eighteenth century, even though he taught and wrote for the most part after that popularity had reached its peak and was waning. A keen student of Spinoza and Kant, Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus was professor of theology at Heidelberg for the last forty years of his life.

The most helpful way to summarize his views may be to contrast them with those of Reimarus:¹⁰

1. *With regard to the purpose of his writings.*¹¹ Like Kant, Paulus saw himself as a friend and apologist for Christianity. The preface to his *Life of Jesus* was a vigorous polemic against orthodox Christianity, particularly against the doctrines of imputation and substitutionary atonement. He affirmed, however, that he gladly believed all that is worthy of belief. Modern people reject the Bible, he said, because they do not understand it; and they do not understand it because they fail to understand the environment in which the Bible was written. When the Bible and its environment are explained to them (as he set out in his books to do), they will believe it.

Paulus, however, wanted to distinguish not only between true Christianity and orthodox Christianity, but also between true Christianity and Reimarus's radically reconstructed history of Christianity. Reimarus had separated Jesus from Christianity. Paulus's purpose, expressed positively, was to show the continuity between Jesus and

¹⁰Critical expositions of Paulus's views can be found in Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 48–57, and in Theodore Christlieb, *Modern Doubt and Christian Belief* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1875), 345–53.

¹¹Most importantly, *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Commentar über die drey ersten Evangelien* [Philological-critical and historical commentary on the first three gospels], 2d ed. (Lübeck: J. F. Bohn, 1804–5); *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Commentar über das Evangelium des Johannes* [Philological-critical and historical commentary on the Gospel of John] (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1812); and *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* [The life of Jesus as the basis of a purely historical account of early Christianity] (Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1828).

Christianity as the rational religion. This he did by emphasizing the ethical personality of Jesus. As we shall note in a moment, Paulus wanted to play down the significance of miracles. In a characteristic statement he wrote, "The truly miraculous thing about Jesus is Himself, the purity and serene holiness of His character, which is, notwithstanding, genuinely human, and adapted to the imitation and emulation of mankind."¹²

2. *With regard to Jesus' view of his messiahship.* Paulus emphasized that Jesus' great purpose was to bring about changes in the moral character of his hearers and thus to bring in the rule of God for many. This, he insisted, is the essence of Christianity. Paulus rejected altogether Reimarus's notion that Jesus held to the concept of a political Messiah, but his own explanation of Jesus' messianic consciousness was exceedingly vague. Jesus, Paulus said, appropriated to himself everything in the Jewish messianic ideal that was worthy of God and fulfilled all that in his holy religion of love as the spiritual Son of God. Jesus was even willing to die as the Messiah in order to win a higher messiahship as the Son of Man.

3. *With regard to the miracles of Jesus.* It is for his rational "explanations" of the miracles recorded in the Gospels that Paulus is best known by later generations. He is usually cited as a horrible example of a position that soon came to be viewed as rather silly. At this point Paulus can be viewed as providing a bit of "comic relief" in the history of Gospels criticism!

Reimarus had explained the miracle stories as either staged events or pure fables, the kind of tale that can be expected in the development of the tradition about any hero, based often on Old Testament expectations and calculated to confirm belief in Jesus' messiahship. For Paulus, however, an understanding of the environment in which the Gospels were written is crucial. This was a prescientific, miracle-believing age. Owing to an ignorance of secondary causes and to inaccurate observation, events that had perfectly rational explanations were attributed to the direct agency of God. Something really hap-

¹²Quoted by Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 51.

pened in each case. Paulus did not deny that. But it was not accurately observed or described.

For example, Paulus explained that the healing miracles were due to Jesus' superior appreciation of the power of suggestion, his psychological impact upon the nervous system of long-time sufferers, or his use of medicines whose healing powers were known to him alone.

But what about the so-called nature miracles? Here especially is where later readers have found Paulus's explanations more amusing than convincing. For example, in the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' generous example in sharing what food he had with others influenced various rich persons present to share what they had also. When Jesus was seen walking on the water, he was actually walking along the shore in a mist that covered his feet from view. The transfiguration scene was the impression made on the drowsy disciples by Jesus' standing on a hill talking to two strangers with the sun rising behind them. The raising of the dead—including Lazarus (remember Reimarus's explanation in footnote 6 on p. 18, above)—was actually a deliverance from premature burial, because those who were raised were not dead but in a coma. In Judaea at that time, burial took place only three hours after death, and sometimes, therefore, those buried were not actually dead.

What Paulus wanted to stress, however, in good Kantian fashion, was that miracles are of absolutely no importance for religious faith. The most puzzling event in the phenomenal world can neither prove nor disprove any spiritual truth, because how can we know for sure what has brought that event about?

There is, of course, a significant philosophy of history and of revelation involved in that statement. For Paulus, a "miracle"—like any other historical event—would be merely a brute, isolated, unexplained fact. In the biblical philosophy of history, a miracle is not an isolated event; rather, it takes place in the context of redemptive history and is accompanied by divine verbal revelation that gives us authoritative interpretation of its meaning. In Paulus, the rationalist, we see how the denial of the Bible's own view of *word* revelation ultimately leads to the denial of the meaningful possibility of *act* revelation.

4. *With regard to the moral problem at the very origin of the church.* Paulus was anxious to clear the disciples of Reimarus's charge of

fraud, pointing out that the disciples were children of their age and could not be blamed for being poor observers. However, as Schweitzer argues, Paulus actually shifted the moral blame to Jesus himself, since he presented Jesus as taking advantage of the evil of premature burial without teaching his disciples that it was evil and seeking to bring an end to it.¹³

5. *With regard to the resurrection of Jesus and the origin of the Christian church.* Reimarus had claimed that the disciples' proclamation of the Resurrection was fraudulent. No, said Paulus. The disciples actually saw Jesus alive after the Crucifixion! They saw the nail prints in his hands. Again, what had taken place was premature burial.

Paulus's view is often referred to as the "trance" or "swoon" theory of the Resurrection. This theory was widely held by the rationalists of the time. Crucifixion was a very slow death, and Jesus did not actually die on the cross. Several details in the gospel records, so it was claimed, point to factors that caused Jesus to revive in the grave: the coolness of the tomb; the aromatic ointments applied to his body; the spear-thrust into his side, which was only a superficial wound and actually served the therapeutic purpose of a phlebotomy (a bloodletting); the loud cry that Jesus uttered immediately before lapsing into unconsciousness, which shows that his strength was not exhausted; and then, most important of all, the earthquake, which served both to revive Jesus and to roll the stone away from the tomb's entrance.

After some forty days, Jesus did die. First, however, he assembled his disciples; a cloud came between him and them; and the two secret followers of Jesus who had been talking with him at the Transfiguration exhorted the disciples not to dawdle, but to be up and doing.¹⁴

¹³Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 53.

¹⁴Another value of an historical study such as this, one that I did not mention in the Introduction, is that it enables us to recognize that many allegedly new theories regarding the historical Jesus are not new at all. A good example is the book by the Jewish critic of Christianity, Hugh J. Schonfield, entitled *The Passover Plot* (New York: Random House, 1965). That best-seller stirred up the kind of controversy and headline coverage in the media that might be compared with the fuss in 1988 over the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Actually, however, the "new" view presented by Schonfield essentially combined the trance theory of Paulus with the fraud theory of

Schweitzer comments that Paulus saved his own sincerity only at the expense of the sincerity of the disciples, whom he depicts as utterly ridiculous, and of Jesus, who does not protest against their ridiculous interpretations of what was happening.¹⁵

Paulus's historical significance may be summarized very briefly. In several ways, Paulus, along with Kant and Schleiermacher, was an important precursor of the later Ritschlian liberalism: (1) in his emphasis on the exemplary ethical personality and teaching of Jesus as the essence of the Christian religion, (2) in his minimizing of the eschatological element in Jesus' messianic consciousness, and (3) in his playing down of the theological significance of miracles.

Surely, however, the rationalistic explanations that Paulus offered for the apparently supernatural elements in the Gospels are most unimpressive. They merely show us what desperate measures some have been willing to take in order to maintain the essential historicity of the gospel accounts while rejecting anything that points beyond the "natural" realm of present experience. And thus they help us to understand why many later critics became more radical in surrendering both the rationalistic explanations and the historicity of the Gospels.¹⁶

Reimarus (although neither of their names appears in the index), with the fraud placed at the feet of Jesus himself, who plotted with Joseph of Arimathea, Judas Iscariot, and others (not including Jesus' immediate disciples) both his apparent death and his rescue from the tomb and temporary recovery.

¹⁵Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 57.

¹⁶Frequently in this historical survey, the classifications "liberal" and "radical" are used to indicate two general schools of Gospels criticism. What ideas are to be associated with each school will become clearer as we proceed—for example, with regard to the historical reliability of the Gospels and the relative importance of Jesus and the church (the believing community) as the creative force in the origin of Christianity. Since these labels are merely generalizations (though helpful ones, I believe, in allowing us to see "the big picture" in the history of Gospels criticism), we shall find that certain critics display particular features of both traditions. Here we might note that while Paulus, as indicated above, was clearly a precursor of the liberal school, Reimarus in important ways pointed in the radical direction.