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Quests for the Historical Jesus: Highlights in the History of the Discipline

Before the Twentieth Century (ca. 1750–1900)

Before what came to be called “the quest for the historical Jesus,” “the Jesus of history” was thought to be identical to “the Christ of faith.” The intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment initiated the historical quest. The Gospels came to be viewed not simply as Scripture but as historical sources.

H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768) wrote a four-thousand-page manuscript, published anonymously as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. It was a rationalist reconstruction of early Christianity that presented Jesus as an unsuccessful political reformer; the disciples invented the story of the resurrection by stealing the body of Jesus. Reimarus hoped to create a rational (nonrevealed) Christianity.

D. F. Strauss (1808–74) observed the mythical dimension of the Gospels and assumed that, once it was stripped away, a defensible, rationalistic Jesus could be recovered. Strauss’s Jesus was a religious genius, an example for humanity.

The nineteenth century saw a spate of literary portraits of Jesus in which he was a great, noble teacher. These portraits of Jesus invariably were idealistic, romantic, and rationalistic.¹

First Half of the Twentieth Century (ca. 1900–1950)

Albert Schweitzer's (1875–1965) book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906) had an enormous impact. Schweitzer surveyed the nineteenth-century portraits of Jesus and determined that the authors inevitably portrayed Jesus as the figure that they personally wanted him to be. He also averred that the actual historical Jesus was a zealous, apocalyptic fanatic, lacking in relevance for our time.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) reached the pessimistic conclusion that certain knowledge of Jesus was all but impossible, but he proposed that such knowledge was also theologically unnecessary. Christian faith could be based on the existential truth embedded in New Testament mythology rather than on literal truth that might have been presented in more historically reliable documents.

Christian interest in the historical Jesus waned during this period, though significant studies continued to be produced by scholars such as Alfred Loisy, Maurice Gogul, Charles Guignebert, Joachim Jeremias, C. H. Dodd, and many more.

The New Quest (ca. 1950–80)

Bultmann's students became convinced that their teacher had driven a wedge too deeply between "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith." Some measure of continuity between the two was needed. Otherwise, Christianity would sink into Docetism and Jesus would become a phantom. Their work was sometimes called "the new

quest” to distinguish it from the “lives of Jesus” produced in the former era.

Ernst Käsemann (1906–98) wrote an essay in 1953 in which he parted ways with his teacher (Bultmann) and argued for greater continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

Günther Bornkamm (1905–90) and Norman Perrin (1920–76) likewise published books on Jesus, which claimed it might be impossible to produce a biography of the man but that it was possible to make judgments regarding certain facts about him. Bornkamm and Perrin presented lists of “indisputable facts” regarding Jesus.

J. M. Robinson (1924–2016) wrote *The New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1959). Robinson sought to demonstrate points of consistency between the Jesus who lived and the Jesus of Christian proclamation.

Features of the new quest include an awareness of the limits of historical reconstruction; a recognition that the Gospels are religiously biased; an insistence on the role of history in understanding Jesus’s significance.

Recent Studies (ca. 1980–present)

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a revival of interest in the historical Jesus.

The Jesus Seminar was launched in 1985. A largely American group, these scholars held regular meetings to discuss the sayings and deeds of Jesus and to vote on their historical authenticity. They deemed about 20 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels to be historically verifiable apart from any consideration of religious ideology. Numerous biographies of Jesus were produced by scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, John Meier, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright.

Wright suggested that the work of some scholars (Meier, Sanders, and himself—but not the Jesus Seminar) should be called “the third quest” as a way to distinguish their work from both the former “lives of Jesus” and the skeptical “new quest” work done by Bultmann’s students. Characteristics of this so-called third quest would include a more accurate knowledge of first-century Judaism (and more emphasis on Jesus’s Jewish identity) and a more positive assessment of the Gospel traditions (chastened use of “the criterion of dissimilarity”).

People who did not understand that the term “third quest” was intended to refer to a particular type of historical Jesus studies sometimes thought the term was a label for a chronological period (e.g., all the studies associated with the widespread revival of interest in the late twentieth century). Thus some surveys speak of the “old quest,” the “new quest,” and the “third quest” as eras of scholarship.

Most scholars would eventually conclude that labels like “new quest” and “third quest” are inaccurate and subject to misinterpretation.

There is only one quest for the historical Jesus, which has continued unabated for centuries, albeit with different expressions and degrees of intensity.

1. See Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).