

**FROM “VITA CHRISTI” TO “MARGINAL JEW”:  
THE LIFE OF JESUS AS CRITERION OF REFORM  
IN PRE-CRITICAL AND POST-CRITICAL QUESTS**  
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### 1. A Thesis

In the standard scholarly narrative, the different phases of the Quest for the Historical Jesus are placed in opposition to one another and assigned distinctive traits. This occurs even when it is acknowledged that later phases take up either methodological or evidential insights that have been pursued in earlier phases.<sup>1</sup> The present symposium takes issue with this narrative by raising an important question: whether there are unexamined continuities among the First, Second, and Third Quests, either at the level of scholarly method or theological reaction, that remain to be discovered.

This question invites an interesting and even more fundamental one: can such a search for continuities be pushed even further backwards chronologically? In other words, are there unexamined continuities between the “pre-critical” uses of the historical life of Jesus (e.g., the recalling of the “mysteries of the life of Christ” as an aid to devotion) and the understandings of the “historical Jesus” assumed by the various phases of the Quest? And this question in turn provokes yet another, more specifically hermeneutical one: does the very concept of “the quest for the historical Jesus”, as formulated by Reimarus and all those who have followed him, *really* constitute a critical and absolute break with all previous inquiry into the

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<sup>1</sup>The standard narrative portrays the “No Quest” period at the outset of the twentieth century as the reaction to the “failure” of the original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Quest as documented by Albert Schweitzer, the New or Second Quest as a critique of the “No Quest” period’s exclusively kerygmatic focus at the instigation of Ernst Käsemann and others, and the Third Quest as a critique of the Second Quest’s lack of serious engagement with either Jesus’ Jewishness and its complex Jewish background, or (in some versions) Jesus’ relationship to the early Church.

historical life of Jesus? Or is there, despite the obvious differences, a *basic continuity* between critical and pre-critical approaches?

I want to argue that such a continuity exists, even in the midst of clear and demonstrable discontinuities. It consists of *the use of the historical life of Jesus as a criterion of critique and reform*. To test this thesis, I will consider what appear to be widely divergent materials: the medieval appeals to the life of Jesus made by Jacobus de Voragine (*Legenda aurea*) and Ludolf of Saxony (*Vita Jesu Christi*); Hermann Samuel Reimarus' *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* as representative of the critical beginnings of the Quest; Robert Funk's work with the Jesus Seminar, as an example of the New or Second Quest as well as a logical conclusion of Reimarus' critique; and John Meier's ongoing series *A Marginal Jew*, which Meier himself has styled as representative of the Third Quest.

This *criteriological* presupposition—the retrieval of the historical life of Jesus as a standard by which to judge current Christian practice—seems to be a constant throughout the Christian tradition, no matter how the term “historical” is understood. This appears to be a truism; nevertheless it is a hermeneutical factor ignored by the standard scholarly Quest and one that needs more exploration in relation to historical Jesus studies. In addition, this presupposition is always already *theological* and is grounded on a thoroughly Christological understanding of Christian praxis, in order to be able to point out the deficiencies in that praxis which an appeal to the “historical” Jesus would remedy. Thus a more adequate view of the First Quest would acknowledge its critique of previous Christian tradition, but also recognize a shared concern that renders the critique less radical than it might first appear. And the Third Quest, whose divergent results so far have had minimal impact on systematic Christology, might be more generously appropriated by theologians disappointed in the “decontextualized” Jesus who is portrayed

according to the criteria of the historical-critical method as connected neither to Judaism nor to Christianity.

## 2. The Evidence

### 2.1 *Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda aurea*

Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda sanctorum (Readings on the Saints)*, more popularly called the *Legenda aurea (The Golden Legend)*, dates from around 1260.<sup>2</sup> It is a compilation from various sources of the lives of the saints, arranged according to their place in the medieval liturgical calendar. Along with sanctoral hagiography, *The Golden Legend* also deals with the liturgical feast days which mark events in the life of Jesus, such as his birth, circumcision, epiphany, passion, resurrection, and ascension. Jacobus' precise purpose for writing *The Golden Legend* is unknown. The work's original audience may have been preachers within Jacobus' own Dominican order; its purpose might have been to supply them ample material for preaching and teaching.<sup>3</sup> Over time, though, the work became extraordinarily popular through its use in private reading and an aid to devotion, and its tremendous influence can be seen throughout medieval and early modern art and literature.

Jacobus' intentions in treating events in the life of Jesus are fundamentally doctrinal and exhortatory. His method is the medieval hermeneutic of the four-fold sense of scripture (literal, allegorical, moral/tropological, anagogical/eschatological),<sup>4</sup> with the allegorical and moral clearly predominant. While not scholastic, his method follows a very systematic interpretive schema. An example is his

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<sup>2</sup>For bibliographic information, see William Granger Ryan's introduction to Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. W. G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 1:xiii-xviii.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 1:xvii-xviii, citing the research of A. Boureau, *La légende dorée* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984) 21-25.

<sup>4</sup>See Henri de Lubac, "On an Old Distich: The Doctrine of the 'Fourfold Sense' in Scripture", in idem, *Theological Fragments*, trans. R. Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989) 109-27.

treatment of "The Passion of the Lord".<sup>5</sup> He harmonizes the canonical passion narratives and, since the reader is assumed to be well-acquainted with the story, the literal meaning passes almost unnoticed. The allegorical and moral meanings, however, are scrupulously drawn out from the events of the passion through appeals to various citations from all parts of Scripture, from patristic authorities (especially Augustine and Bernard), and from apocryphal narratives. Jacobus begins with a three-part schema: "the passion of Christ was bitter in its pains, scornful in the mockery it laid upon him, and fruitful in its manifold benefits."<sup>6</sup> He then meticulously interprets the five kinds of pain (its shameful, injustice, that it was caused by Christ's friends, that it affected "the tenderness of his body", and "that it penetrated every part of his body [and] smote all his senses"), the four types of mockery (at Annas's house, at Herod's palace, in front of Pilate, and on the cross), and lastly the three redemptive benefits of the passion (remission of sins, granting of grace, and manifestation of glory). Some of these are divided into additional sub-topics, such as the types of physical suffering that Christ endured, along with their deeper meaning. When, for example, Jacobus claims that Christ's physical hearing suffered from the pain of insults, this becomes an occasion to recall the opening verses of the Johannine passion narrative (John 18:4-6) and interpret them to mean that Christ had "power enough to strike down his persecutors solely by the sound of his voice"; he quotes Augustine to the effect that in using only a word, Christ "laid them low by the power of his hidden divinity."<sup>8</sup> The passage culminates in soteriology by articulating four reasons why this mode of redemption is beneficial for humanity (it is acceptable to God as a peace offering, suitable for curing humanity's "illness" that stems from Adam's sin, most efficacious for attracting humankind,

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<sup>5</sup>*The Golden Legend*, 1:203-14 (no. 53).

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* 1:203.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* 1:204.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* 1:205.

and best adapted to defeating the devil). The reading closes with an lengthy appended narrative (clearly labeled apocryphal) concerning Pilate's origins, his punishment by the Roman emperor for having stolen Christ's seamless tunic, and the conflicting accounts of his death.<sup>9</sup>

The discussions of the life of Jesus in *The Golden Legend* would hardly qualify as "history" in the modern sense. Nevertheless, Jacobus' assumption of the fundamental historical accuracy of the gospels, his use of supplementary materials such as Peter Comestor's *Scholastic History* (c. 1170), and his attempts to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources, demonstrate the desire to ground his Christological reflections in what he considered to be the actual historical events, and thereby provide a stable starting-point for his moral and allegorical conclusions.

## 2.2 Ludolf of Saxony, Vita Jesu Christi

The *Vita Jesu Christi*, composed in the mid-fourteenth century by the Carthusian Ludolf of Saxony, is reputed to be the first comprehensive chronological life of Christ ever written.<sup>10</sup> One of the most popular of late medieval devotional works, its widespread fame was already acknowledged a century after its composition (a chronicler called it *iamdiu per orbem famatum*).<sup>11</sup> Its influence remained astonishingly

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<sup>9</sup>Jacobus' sources are evidently the medieval apocrypha *Vindicta Salvatoris* and *Mors Pilati*. For summaries, see *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. and trans. J. K. Elliot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 213-17.

<sup>10</sup>For the work's origins and the history of its influence, see Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt, S.N.D., *The Vita Christi of Ludolphus the Carthusian*, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Latin Language and Literature, vol. XVI (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1944), and Charles Abbott Conway, *The "Vita Christi" of Ludolph of Saxony and Late Medieval Devotion Centered on the Incarnation: A Descriptive Analysis*, Analecta Cartusiana 34 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1976). Bodenstedt (pp. v, 93) notes predecessors such as the *Meditationes vitae Christi* once attributed to Bonaventure and Simone Fidati da Cascia's *De gestis Domini Salvatoris* (1338-47), but says that none provided a complete biography of Christ as did the *Vita Christi*. Giles Constable mentions the *Vita Christi* of the Augustinian Michael of Massa as one source for Ludolf's *Vita*, but describes neither its contents nor its characteristics. See "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ" in Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Social and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 145-248, at 234 n.476.

<sup>11</sup>Bodenstedt, 53 n.1, citing an anonymous Carthusian chronicler in *Dialogus inter ecclesiam et actorem Filii personam miseris matris piaie condolentis gerentem* (1485).

strong throughout Europe up through the seventeenth century, and it had a lasting impact on the spiritual writings of such major figures as Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and Francis de Sales.<sup>12</sup>

The *Vita Jesu Christi* is a meditation on the life of Jesus in the form of a detailed commentary on the gospels. In tracing the events of Christ's life from his pre-existence to his ascension into heaven, it emphasizes "the concrete reality of the Incarnation, faithfulness to the record of Scripture and the doctrine of the Church, the relationship between the word and the words and actions of Christ, and the avoidance of fable."<sup>13</sup> Ludolf analyzes each pericope, as we would expect, according to the four senses of scripture, proceeding verse by verse and glossing each verse with his own reflections or with those taken from patristic and medieval authorities<sup>14</sup>. He most often harmonizes the gospels, but also occasionally singles out one evangelist's version of an event even when parallels exist.

The chapter dealing with the stilling of the storm in Matthew (8:23-27) is typical of Ludolf's method. In the first section, each aspect of the narrative (Jesus asleep while wind and waves endanger the boat, the disciples' fear, Jesus' performance of the miracle) is recalled and the deeper meaning is drawn from a whole verse or its important words. For example, he gives four reasons why Jesus was asleep: to show his human nature; to test the faith of the disciples; to incite the disciples to pray in the midst of their fear; and to demonstrate his divine nature and power.<sup>15</sup> In the second part, Ludolf draws further allegorical and moral lessons. Seen allegorically, the boat is not only a figure or symbol (*typus*) of the church

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid. 53-92. Regarding Ignatius, see also Paul Shore, "The *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony and its Influence on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola", *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 30, 1 (January 1998) 1-32.

<sup>13</sup>Conway, *The "Vita Christi,"* 122.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. also Bodenstedt, *The Vita Christi*, 100-06.

<sup>15</sup>Ludolphus de Saxonia, *Vita Jesu Christi ex evangelio et approbatis ab ecclesia catholica doctoribus sedule collecta*, ed. L. M. Rigollot, rev. ed., 4 vols. (Paris: Victor Palmé/Brussels: G. Lebrocqy, 1878) 2:11 (part I, chap. 46, §1).

governed by Christ, sailing through the rough seas of temptation and evil toward the heavenly kingdom,<sup>16</sup> but is also a type of the cross which Christ "ascends" at the end of his life (a play on *ascendente* in v. 23: "et ascendente eo in naviculum, secuti sunt eum discipuli ejus"). The cross, like the boat, saves those who have followed Jesus and indeed brings them "to the shore and the harbor of the heavenly homeland".<sup>17</sup> In the moral or tropological sense, the boat symbolizes both repentance, which brings us to the gate of salvation,<sup>18</sup> and the believer's soul, into which Christ enters by means of grace, accompanied by the three theological virtues, the four cardinal virtues, and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, Ludolf exhorts faithful Christians confronted by temptation to rest secure in faith, to call on Christ who has constant care of us despite appearing to sleep, to model our watchfulness on his own, and to ward off temptation by serving God according to the counsels of wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Ludolf's interest in the meaning of Christ's historical life is due to his major overarching concern: the imitation of Christ is the only means to salvation. In this incarnational and soteriological concern the work directly mirrors its epoch. The imitation of the humanity of Christ as an ideal for all Christians began to be emphasized in the eleventh century and soon developed into a widespread phenomenon,

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid. 2:13 (part I, chap. 46, §4): "In hac navi continentur fideles, qui cum Christo per mare seculi ad regnum coelorum perveniunt."

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. 2:14 (part I, chap. 46, §5): "perveniunt ad littus et portum patriae coelestis."

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. (part I, chap. 46, §6): "Et qui per poenitentiam maxime crux tollitur, ideo etiam tropologice seu moraliter per naviculam poenitentia designatur, qui per ipsam homo ad portum salutis deducitur. . . ."

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. 2:15 (part I, chap. 46, §7): "In hanc naviculam Christus ascendit, cum eam per gratiam inhabitat. Sequuntur autem eum discipuli, id est virtutes tres theologicae, et quatuor cardinales, et septem dona Spiritus Sancti."

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. 2:15-16 (part I, chap. 46, §8): "Igitur quando tribulamur et tentamur, debemus esse constantes in fide, et nihil haesitare, qui licet circa nos et facta nostra Dominus videatur dormire, ipse tamen diligentissimus est super custodia nostra quotidie, qui etsi jam sui corporis somno non dormiat, caveamus tamen ne nostri corporis somno nobis dormiat et quiescat. . . . Volens ergo ad servitutem Dei accedere, secundum concilium Sapientis, praeparet se ad tentationes imminentes."

eclipsing other models of spirituality.<sup>21</sup> Eventually it became the fundamental characteristic of late medieval spirituality, "when the imitation of Christ's earthly life, down to the last detail, came to be seen as an essential preliminary to the salvation of man."<sup>22</sup> The *Vita Christi* shares in this belief, and makes all other concerns subordinate to it. Ludolf's entire hermeneutic thus has one fundamental goal: to urge the believer to *imitate* and thereby *participate in* the saving life of Christ, the incarnation of God, who reveals God in human form. Without such discipleship, there is no chance of participating in the divine life that saves sinful humanity: "no one can hastily attain the contemplation of the Supreme Majesty without reaching proficiency through the life of our Redeemer."<sup>23</sup> Only by the believer's participation in the life of Christ through imitation will perfection be achieved, only in this way will the person as the "image of God" be restored in the midst of a world which, while having fallen away from its creator and needing redemption itself, nevertheless mediates the presence of God and thus operates sacramentally.

In all virtues and good character, therefore, always keep before yourself that brightest mirror and exemplar of complete sanctity, the life and customs of the son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who moreover was sent to us from heaven in order to go before us in the way of virtues and to give us by example the law of life and instruction and to teach us as himself; that just as by nature we were created in his image, so we might as much as possible be remade according to his character by imitating his virtues, we who have sullied his image in us through sin. Moreover, to the extent that anyone tries to pattern himself after him in the imitation of his virtues, so in heaven he will be closer in the brightness of his glory, and more shining.<sup>24</sup>

Ludolf often points to Christ's humility, obedience, poverty, service to others, or sufferings in order to underline how normal was his human existence and how the imitation of it is within the believer's reach. Just as Christ made his way through both the normal conditions of his life and his extraordinary

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<sup>21</sup>For the development of this ideal, cf. Constable, "Imitation of Christ". He notes that "the ideal of imitating Christ in all respects deepened in the eleventh century into a passionate devotion to His humanity, which increasingly excluded other models and established Christ as the supreme exemplar for devout Christians" (179).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. 180.

<sup>23</sup>Ludolphus, *Vita Jesu Christi*, 1:2 (Proemium, §4); translation from Conway, 123.

<sup>24</sup>*Vita Jesu Christi*, 1:6 (Proemium, §10); translation from Conway, 130.

sufferings at the end in order to do his Father's will, so too the Christian, in imitating Christ, can overcome the evils and sufferings encountered in a fallen world and participate in that redemption that Christ's life has accomplished.<sup>25</sup> And of all the events of Christ's life, the "exemplar of complete sanctity" is seen most clearly in the passion, which should be central to the Christian's meditation and imitation:

For if you long to arrive at an understanding of divinity, it remains that you be taught through the humanity which was taken up as well as by the passion of that man (*per assumptam humanitatem et humanitatis Passionem*), so as to ascend step by step as by a royal way towards higher things. Thus it is not given to arrive at the height of the Godhead or its extraordinary sweetness except to those drawn by a certain devout faith in the feeling of delight through the bitterness of the humanity of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Ludolf's emphasis on the historical reality of the incarnation explains his parallel emphasis on both the image of God in historical humanity and the vestiges of God's image in the created world through which humanity makes its way on pilgrimage to heaven. It also explains his explicit desire to avoid fables and legends in his account.<sup>27</sup> He stresses the concreteness of events, even as he pursues their allegorical and tropological meanings. This concern for concreteness also leads to the method of meditation that he proposes: one should enter fully into all the events of Christ's life by visualizing and concretizing what one has read in the gospels, imagining oneself present with Jesus and his companions, experiencing him just as they did.

Be in escort with the apostles as the Good Shepherd performs his glorious miracles. Be present at his death with his blessed Mother and John to suffer with them and to console them: and with a certain devout curiosity, feeling your way, touch each of the wounds of your Saviour, who has thus died for you. Seek him resurrected with Mary Magdelene, until you are worthy to find him. . . . If you follow him thus for a little while on earth with a conscientious, humble and devout heart, he himself will lift you up to him as he sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. . . .<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. Conway, 129-43.

<sup>26</sup>*Vita Jesu Christi*, 4:4 (part II, chap. 58, §5); translation from Conway, 132 (modified).

<sup>27</sup>See Conway, 48: "Ludolph sees the Incarnation not as a magic event or a romantic tale, but as God himself coming to grips with, and assuming, physical reality." See also *Vita Jesu Christi*, 1:7 (Proemium, §11).

<sup>28</sup>*Vita Jesu Christi*, 1:3 (Proemium, §5); translation from Conway, 126.

### 2.3 Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Wolfenbüttel Fragments

Reimarus' *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* was not intended for publication; the manuscript was a private expression of his long-held skepticism about revealed religion, circulated only among a small circle of friends. A year before his death in 1768, a copy of the manuscript came into the possession of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Later, between 1774 and 1778, Lessing published anonymous excerpts from it under the title *Fragmente eines Ungenannten*, claiming to have found them in the Duke of Brunswick's library in Wolfenbüttel.<sup>29</sup>

The most controversial fragments were the sixth (*Über die Auferstehungsgeschichte*), Reimarus' attack on the veracity of the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, and the seventh (*Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*), where he attempted to recover, by the use of historical method, what he argued was the original intention and message of Jesus. "He claimed that the gospels were records of early Christian faith, not transcripts of history, and that when we study the actual history we discover a very different picture."<sup>30</sup> Reimarus thereby attempted to expose as a fraud the church's "dogmatic" interpretation of Jesus as the suffering and resurrected divine savior who had preached an other-worldly kingdom, a deception concocted by Jesus' disciples after his death and continued by the early church. These harsh criticisms of mainstream Christian belief were not original with Reimarus, but rather were developments of similar arguments in favor of rational religion made by English deists during the eighteenth century.

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<sup>29</sup>See Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778-1860* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1985) 1-3, for the circumstances surrounding the manuscript and its eventual publication.

<sup>30</sup>N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume Two: Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 17.

Reimarus had encountered such arguments while on a study tour of England in 1720-21. Indeed, they were already familiar within those German intellectual circles influenced by the Enlightenment.<sup>31</sup>

Reimarus' Jesus was a Jewish reformer and enlightened moral teacher who attempted to improve humanity through his teaching of the love of God and of neighbor, humility, self-denial, and the suppression of evil desires. "These are not great mysteries or tenets of the faith that [Jesus] explains, proves, and preaches; they are nothing other than moral teachings and duties intended to improve man inwardly and with all his heart",<sup>32</sup> that is, high moral ideals that any rational person could grasp. The "kingdom of God" that he preached was a temporal kingdom that all Jews of Jesus' time had expected: God would establish it through the Messiah, an action that promised freedom from oppression and material happiness. Jesus identified himself as this political Messiah, but eventually lost the support of both the people and his own disciples, and, after forcing the hand of the authorities, was put to death. His cry of desolation on the cross is the sign of his final despair; his God had failed him.

Jesus' disciples had shared his original intention to found the kingdom of God on earth. But rather than accept his failure as the end of their own hopes, they shook off their initial despair and developed a different goal. During their time with Jesus, they had learned "that by preaching and announcement of the kingdom of the Messiah, not only a sufficient maintenance, but also power, honor, and glory were attainable."<sup>33</sup> In order to gain this power and privilege for themselves and legitimate their ambitions of presiding over the kingdom that Jesus had promised, they stole the body of Jesus, fabricated the story of

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<sup>31</sup>Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought*, xvii-xviii, 3; see also Gregory W. Dawes' introduction to Fragment VII in *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, ed. G. W. Dawes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000/Leiderdorp [NL]: Deo Publishing, 1999) 54. Dawes (57-86) reproduces excerpts of this fragment from *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans. Ralph S. Fraser, ed. Charles H. Talbert, Lives of Jesus Series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

<sup>32</sup>Reimarus, ["On the Intention of Jesus and his Disciples"(Fragment VII, §6)], in *The Historical Jesus Quest*, 62.

<sup>33</sup>Reimarus, Fragment VII, §55, in *The Historical Jesus Quest*, 81.

his resurrection, his appearances, and his second coming, and in general invented the belief in Jesus as the divine Son of God who died for the sins of the world. The Christianity that developed from the disciples and their adherents is nothing but a fraud, built upon a string of deceptions.

Reimarus' polemics against Christianity should not be allowed to obscure his key insights which continue to influence historical Jesus research: that the life of Jesus had undergone a process of interpretation by the disciples and the early Church after Jesus' death, and that consequently the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, while not absolutely separate, are by no means identical.<sup>34</sup> The high degree of discontinuity which Reimarus posited between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ has been strongly contested in theology throughout the last century, particularly by Catholic Christology. However, the methodological claim that is quite clear here—i.e., that there exists an absolute rupture between traditional Christianity's interpretation of the life of Jesus and his own repudiation of that interpretation on the basis of a more objective method—has not really been probed with any precision.

#### 2.4 Robert W. Funk

Robert Funk's well-known view of the historical Jesus has long been intertwined with that of the Jesus Seminar, which he co-founded in 1985 with John Dominic Crossan and whose primary exponent he has been. However, his book *Honest to Jesus* makes it easier to discern Funk's own method, goals, and resulting Jesus-portrait (which in fact mirror those of the Jesus Seminar to a great degree),<sup>35</sup> and to hear

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<sup>34</sup>In addition, Dawes (*The Historical Jesus Quest*, 56) notes that "it is to [Reimarus'] credit to have grasped the proclamation of repentance and the kingdom of God as the core of Jesus' teaching and to have attempted an interpretation of this phrase within the context of the Jewish religious world of Jesus' age." Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 17) claims that by insisting that Jesus be understood within his historical context, Reimarus "must be seen, not just as a protester against Christianity, but, despite his intentions, as a true reformer of it."

<sup>35</sup>Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperCollins/Polebridge Press, 1996).

his distinctive voice in the methodological introduction to *The Five Gospels*, the primary report of the Jesus Seminar's conclusions to date.<sup>36</sup>

Funk is clear about the Jesus he seeks:

I share an interest in who Jesus is and especially who he *was*. I am intrigued by the provocative but shadowy figure that one occasionally catches sight of in the ancient gospel texts. In his authentic parables and aphorisms, Jesus provides a glimpse into another reality, one that lies beyond present conceptual horizons. . . . The Jesus of that alternative world encourages me to celebrate life, to suck the marrow out of existence, to explore, and probe, and experiment, to venture into uncharted seas, without fear of a tyrannical and vindictive God.

This contrasts sharply with the Jesus of mainstream Christian piety, whom Funk considers "a Christ imposed on [believers] by a narrow and rigid legacy" and "a mythical Jesus conjured up by modern evangelists" in order to enslave believers. For Funk, this "slavery" provokes in him an agonizing distress and a desire to free all those caught in such abusive bondage: "I believe that such a hankering is inspired by Jesus himself, who seems to be untouched by religious bigotry and tyranny and unacquainted with the straitjacket of literalism and dogmatism."<sup>37</sup>

Funk's position (along with that of the Jesus Seminar) is often characterized as emblematic of the New or Second Quest.<sup>38</sup> But his methodology has much in common with Reimarus; its initial steps mirror Reimarus' hermeneutic of suspicion: "the quest of the historical Jesus is an effort to emancipate the

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<sup>36</sup>*The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, ed. and trans. R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (New York: Macmillan/Polebridge Press, 1993). The "five gospels" which the Jesus Seminar takes to be the primary source material for the historical Jesus are, of course, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Thomas. The sayings source Q is also an important element in the Seminar's reconstruction.

<sup>37</sup>*Honest to Jesus*, 18-19 (emphasis original). Earlier, before the founding of the Jesus Seminar, Funk had already argued that Jesus' parables were best understood as metaphors communicating an alternative "pre-conceptual" knowledge "of unsegmented reality, of an undifferentiated nexus, of a seamless world. . . . In the parable, reality is aborning; the parable opens onto a unfinished world because the world is in the course of conception. This means that both narrator and auditor *risk* the parable; they both participate the narrative and venture its outcome" ("The Good Samaritan as Metaphor," in *Parables and Presence: Forms of the New Testament Tradition* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982] 29-34, at 30.

<sup>38</sup>See, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, review of *Honest to Jesus*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 740-42, at 740 (on Funk); N. T. Wright, "Jesus Christ: Quest for the Historical Jesus" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, eds. David Noel Freedman, et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:796-802, at 799 (on the Jesus Seminar).

Galilean sage from the tangle of Christian overlay that obscures, to some extent, who Jesus was and what he said, to distinguish the religion *of* Jesus from the religion *about* Jesus."<sup>39</sup> Jesus's own "gospel" was obscured when it "was combined with the kerygma of the early Christian movement—the 'gospel' of Paul and others—to create the Jesus of the narrative gospels," that is, the Christ of faith.<sup>40</sup> This merger failed by the second century AD/CE, when "the Christ of faith eventually overpowered the Jesus of history." The clue for Funk is the Apostles' Creed, which moves without a break from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate". "This creed calls on the believer to affirm nothing about the historical Jesus other than his virgin birth at the beginning of his life and his suffering, execution, and resurrection at the end. *It is a creed with an empty center.*"<sup>41</sup>

Funk's method for retrieving an emancipatory historical Jesus is best encapsulated in what *The Five Gospels* calls "the seven pillars of scholarly wisdom": (1) the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith; (2) the assumption that the synoptics are closer than the Fourth Gospel to the historical Jesus; (3) the priority of Mark and its use as a source by Matthew and Luke; (4) the existence of Q; (5) the basically non-eschatological character of Jesus' message; (6) the fundamental difference between oral and print cultures; (7) gospel tradition is considered mythic and unhistorical until proven otherwise. These "pillars" of modern biblical scholarship have been gradually put in place since D. F. Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835); the seventh, though, is actually a contemporary reversal of the burden of proof that had held sway from Strauss onwards.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>*Honest to Jesus*, 31 (emphasis original).

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 43 (emphasis original). For a similar argument, see *The Five Gospels*, 7.

<sup>42</sup>*The Five Gospels*, 2-5. In *Honest to Jesus*, 23-29, Funk enumerates seven more generalized "ground rules for the quest" as well as nine "locators", descriptions of the current epistemological and religious context in which the rules are employed. Cf. also Ben F. Meyer's review of *The Five Gospels* in *Interpretation* 48 (1994) 405-07.

What portrait of Jesus results from this method? The historical Jesus was probably an illiterate peasant, but had “rhetorical skills [that] bordered on the magical”. Indeed, he was a “word wizard” and “comic savant” who “mixed humor with subversive and troubling knowledge born of direct insight.” His rhetorical style “marked him as a social deviant.”<sup>43</sup> The kingdom of God, which was the central theme of his message, “was that region or sphere where God’s dominion was immediate and absolute,” a present reality whose life-giving power could be communicated only indirectly, by means of parables, paradoxes, and all sorts of antithetical constructions.<sup>44</sup> Jesus also communicated this vision by his practices: he kept an open table, made forgiveness reciprocal, condemned public practices of piety, advocated an unbrokered relationship to God, did away with privilege, and declared that rewards and punishments are intrinsic to the actions performed, not extrinsic and deferred to a hereafter.<sup>45</sup> This latter practice underlines a crucial aspect of Jesus’ message: his vision of God’s rule was non-eschatological. Whatever eschatology there is in Jesus’ sayings comes from Jesus’ followers after his death, who reverted to the original eschatological model of John the Baptist in order to interpret their master’s unusual and ultimately misunderstood vision, and from the evangelists, who took up this model, tamed Jesus’ subversive rhetoric, and created the “imaginative theological construct” of Jesus as the awaited Messiah.<sup>46</sup>

With the tools of modern biblical scholarship, however, the Quest in our post-Christian or postmodern age can peek behind the construct and liberate the authentic Jesus of the gospels, the Galilean sage before he was mythicized by early Christianity.

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<sup>43</sup>*Honest to Jesus*, 158.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 149 (“God’s dominion”), 149-58 (parables, paradoxes, etc.) Funk calls the parables and aphorisms “the bedrock of the Jesus tradition” (*ibid.*, 250).

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 310-12.

<sup>46</sup>*The Five Gospels*, 4; *Honest to Jesus*, 145-46, 241-56.

*The renewed quest points to a secular sage who may have more relevance to the spiritual dimensions of society at large than to institutionalized religion. . . . His parables and aphorisms all but obliterate the boundaries separating the sacred from the secular. He can teach us something that has nothing directly to do with what we know as Christianity or, indeed, with organized religion as such.*<sup>47</sup>

The Jesus discovered by this renewed quest (rather than the Third Quest, which Funk calls "an apologetic ploy") can be the catalyst for a renewed or reborn Christianity, which Funk believes "is a tradition worth reforming and saving." A transformed Christianity would imitate Jesus' practices and social deviancy, "a kind of *imitatio christi* but with a different twist."<sup>48</sup> It would reject the imposed orthodoxy of popular creedalism (with its blood atonement, virgin birth, and apocalyptic expectations) as well as the myth of an "external" redeemer hero, and instead reconceive Jesus as the savior who understands our twin predicament of finitude and mortality. The historical Jesus would be "a reality anchor" in a consumer culture full of "unrealistic and potentially demonic dreams."<sup>49</sup>

## 2.5 John Meier, A Marginal Jew

Meier opens his study of the historical Jesus with two gambits that clearly delineate his goal and method. The first is the clever and now-famous conceit of the "unpapal conclave" with its results. Meier's goal is a "limited consensus statement" on the historical Jesus, "based on purely historical sources and arguments" established by the most rigorous historical-critical scholarship, which would meet with the approval of the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and agnostic historians locked in the bowels of the Harvard Divinity School library and "be open to verification by any and all sincere persons."<sup>50</sup> The other

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<sup>47</sup>*Honest to Jesus*, 302 (emphasis original).

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 65 (Third Quest as apologetics), 306 (reforming Christianity), 310 (*imitatio*).

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 304 (popular creedalism), 306-08 (external redeemer vs. true savior), 310 ("reality anchor").

<sup>50</sup>John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume I: The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991; hereafter *MJ I*) 1-2 (the "conclave"); *idem*, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume II: Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994; hereafter *MJ II*) 5 (verification).

is his closely-argued distinction between the "historical" Jesus and the "real" Jesus. Since "the total reality of a person is in principle unknowable" and ancient source material, even for the best-known figures, is intrinsically insufficient to allow any complete portrait, the best that can be achieved through any quest is "the historical Jesus", a reconstruction based on retrieval and analysis of the pertinent material by "the scientific tools of modern historical research."<sup>51</sup> This second gambit in turn becomes the first of the three "rules of the road" which govern Meier's now multi-volume journey. The second rule is his dismissal of non-canonical material such as the apocryphal gospels and the Nag Hammadi codices as being either unreliable sources or reworkings of canonical New Testament material; in either case they add no new information about Jesus. Lastly, there are the criteria of historicity with which he examines the remaining major credible resources (the four canonical gospels, Paul, and Josephus): embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation, coherence, and Jesus' rejection and execution (used to discover the types of material that would threaten the powerful and provoke their negative reaction to Jesus).<sup>52</sup>

Meier admits that complete objectivity is impossible. He rather conceives of historical objectivity as an "asymptotic goal", reasonably approachable if he adheres to the rules and brackets as best he can his Catholic faith standpoint. Only in this way, he claims, will he be able to craft a Jesus-portrait that will meet the overall criterion of public historical verification and thereby become a reliable resource for systematic theology.<sup>53</sup> He considers his work part of the Third Quest,<sup>54</sup> and is openly critical of those reconstructions that he considers to be influenced by theological commitments (e.g., Hans Küng),

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<sup>51</sup>*MJ I*, 21-26, at 25.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 89-166; *MJ II*, 4-6.

<sup>53</sup>*MJ I*, 4-6.

<sup>54</sup>*MJ II*, 1-2; *idem*, "Dividing Lines in Jesus Research Today: Through Dialectical Negation to a Positive Sketch", *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 355-72.

ideological commitments (e.g., the Jesus Seminar), or a combination of the two (e.g., Jon Sobrino and Juan Luis Segundo).<sup>55</sup>

With these cautions in place, how does Meier portray Jesus?<sup>56</sup> The life of Jesus the Galilean Jew was a many-layered *māšāl* or riddle whose complexities rendered him marginal, in many ways, to the Jewish social and cultural world within which he grew up, to the major Jewish religious groups of his day, and to the Roman and Jewish worlds of politics that enveloped his life. "One reason Jesus met a swift and brutal end is simple: he alienated so many individuals and groups in Palestine that, when the final clash came in Jerusalem in A.D. 30, he had very few people, especially people of influence, on his side."<sup>57</sup> He was an eschatological prophet, baptized by John, but soon departed from his mentor's apocalypticism by preaching both the imminent coming of the kingdom of God and its presence in his ministry, as seen in his powerful preaching, his "startling . . . outreach to the religiously and socially marginalized," his open table fellowship, and most especially in his miracles, which would have moved his Jewish audiences to view him as the successor to Elijah or Elisha. "Jesus the prophet proclaimed and actualized the kingdom's coming in word as well as deed, most notably in his enigmatic parables, which often challenged the presumed orderly religious world of his hearers and thus opened them to the new world he was

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<sup>55</sup>Cf. *MJI*, 33 n.8; "Dividing Lines" (for the Jesus Seminar, among others); idem, *The Mission of Christ and His Church: Studies in Christology and Ecclesiology*, Good News Studies, 30 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1990) 33-69 (for reviews of Küng, Sobrino, Segundo).

<sup>56</sup>The only relatively complete statement we have from Meier was written before the start of the *Marginal Jew* series: "Jesus", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, R. E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1316-28. As *A Marginal Jew* has developed, he has provided helpful summaries along the way: *MJI*, 406-09; *MJ II*, 1044-47; *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume III: Companions and Competitors*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 615-47. I rely here mainly on the more schematic summary at the conclusion of "Dividing Lines", 368-69, with further details taken from the other summaries.

<sup>57</sup>*MJI*, 9.

heralding."<sup>58</sup> However, Jesus was not concerned only with parables and riddles. He discussed the observance of the Torah, created a special inner group of disciples as an "end-time Israel" (marked by their special forms of prayer and religious practice) and sent them on mission to their fellow Jews. Some of his followers, perhaps influenced by the heady mix of his teaching, healing, and the rumor of his Davidic lineage, began to view him as the Messiah. Their hopes seemed confirmed during Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem by his symbolic prophetic actions of a triumphal entry into the city and his action against the temple. In light of his clashes with the authorities, however, Jesus himself sensed a deadly danger, perhaps even the martyrdom traditionally linked with the prophets. He shared a final solemn meal with his disciples, using "bread and wine as prophetic symbols of his imminent death, a death he accepted as part of God's inscrutable plan to establish his kingdom, a kingdom Jesus still hoped to share."<sup>59</sup> Jesus' end came swiftly: "betrayed by Judas, arrested in Gethsemane, denied by Peter, interrogated by the temple authorities, and then handed over to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who had him scourged and crucified on Friday, the 14th of Nisan" in 30 A.D. He died and was buried by Joseph of Arimathea along with some of the women who followed him. Any reconstruction must end at this point: neither Jesus' resurrection nor the disciples' experiences of resurrection appearances is subject to historical investigation.

Meier sees the *mašal* that was Jesus' life as having been marked by four more specific "enigmas" which testify to its complexity and make its historical reconstruction less assured than many assume: "the enigma of Jesus' teaching on the Law, the enigmas or riddle-speech of Jesus' parables, the enigmas or riddle-speech of Jesus' self-designations (a better term than 'titles'), and the final enigma or riddle of his death."<sup>60</sup> Meier

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<sup>58</sup>"Dividing Lines", 368.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 369.

<sup>60</sup>*A Marginal Jew III*, 645.

promises to deal with these in the fourth volume. However, a hint of how the discussion might unfold can be glimpsed in his earlier discussion of Jesus' self-identity, which he believes was completely defined by Jesus' mission to preach the coming Kingdom of God.

Jesus was totally other-directed; he did not make himself the direct object of his proclamation. Jesus had a direct *theo*-logy (God as object of his preaching), which involved an indirect or implicit *christo*-logy (Jesus as final agent of God). Thus Jesus' identity was absorbed into and defined by his mission. He gives no indication of suffering an identity crisis or of a desperate need to define himself. He seems to have been quite sure of who he was.

Unfortunately, no one else was. . . . Friends and foes alike groped toward understanding him by using various categories and titles, but without complete satisfaction. The reason for this lies in a basic paradox Jesus presented. Though he rarely spoke about his status, he implicitly made himself *the* pivotal figure in the eschatological drama he announced and inaugurated. . . . [Jesus] spoke and acted on the presumption that he would be the criterion used for the final judgment. That alone involved a monumental claim to a unique status and role at the climax of Israel's history.<sup>61</sup>

### 3. An Evaluation

The thesis I am arguing is that a continuity exists among the pre-critical (here, the medieval) presentations of the life of Jesus and the critical and post-critical retrievals (i.e., the Quest in its various guises). It consists of the use of the historical life of Jesus, however that is defined, as a criterion for the critique and reform of Christian experience. At its most obvious level, the evidence bears this out. Both medieval authors commend the life of Jesus to the individual believer as the locus of God's salvation of humanity and a source for doctrinal and moral lessons that might be applied to the ongoing conversion and reform of the believer's own life. Reimarus and Funk appeal to the historically-retrievable Jesus to critique institutional Christianity, either as fraudulent (Reimarus) or distortive and irrelevant (Funk). Reimarus' suggested "reform" of Christianity is its dissolution; Funk seeks its transformation. Meier's historically-verifiable Jesus is meant to serve three purposes: a corrective to scholarly portraits of Jesus

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<sup>61</sup>"Jesus", *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1323 (§29).

that are either exegetically tendentious or theologically freighted; a foundation for a more adequate Christology; and a way of satisfying the "educated" Christian's need for reliable information about Jesus.<sup>62</sup> Meier's purpose thus differs somewhat from that of his questing colleagues: while Reimarus and Funk are directed *ad extra*, to Christianity at large, Meier's focus is mainly *ad intra*, the scholarly community.

But is there continuity at anything more than this superficial level? Is it even intellectually responsible to mention Jacobus de Voragine, Ludolf of Saxony, Reimarus, Funk, and Meier in the same paragraph? After all, their understandings of history seem incommensurable. Any version of the Quest is rigorously committed to the principle that there is a difference between the world of the gospel text and the world behind the text. Viewed in this way, the medievals appear either naïve or irrelevant because they collapse the two worlds into one. Their hermeneutical assumption—that through the gospel text the believer has unmediated access to Jesus as incarnate savior and moral exemplar—seems outdated because it cannot recognize the gap between Jesus' intentions and those of the evangelists.<sup>63</sup> All the Quests are unanimous in arguing that these worlds and intentions are separable, that the "non-literary" intentions of Jesus are mediated, masked, or distorted, in varying degrees, by the literary intentions of the evangelists, and that therefore only an objective historical method, prescinding from any faith commitments, can discern or decode those intentions, retrieve the historical Jesus, and appreciate the complex relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

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<sup>62</sup>In fact, he suggests a Christology that would involve collaboration among a New Testament exegete, an historical theologian, and systematic theologian.: "Such a joint work might prevent the theologians involved from adopting idiosyncratic or out-dated views" (*The Mission of Christ*, 47). For the needs of the "educated Christian", see *MJ I*, 4.

<sup>63</sup>Werner H. Kelber notes that, in medieval exegesis, "the Bible was perceived to be a single communication, undergirded by a unifying intentionality" ("The Quest for the Historical Jesus, from the Perspectives of Medieval, Modern, and Post-Enlightenment Readings, and in View of Ancient, Oral Aesthetics", in John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Werner H. Kelber, *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict*, Rockwell Lecture Series (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 75-115 at 79.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, though, by developing a point made by Martin Heidegger, has reminded us forcefully that there is never any presuppositionless understanding, and that such an ideal of objectivity actually restricts our ability to understand. Rather, understanding always begins with *prejudices*, anticipatory pre-judgments grounded in a tradition of previous experiences which shape our critical faculties. Prejudices are not disabling, distorting biases (as the Enlightenment claimed) but rather are enabling; they allow us to begin to understand by projecting a meaning upon something (e.g., a text) on the basis of our partial experience of it, and then to either confirm or deny that understanding in the course of further experience. These interpretative projections are rooted in the interpreter's situation which is formed by the tradition or history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) within which the interpreter stands.<sup>64</sup> The Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice", so influential in modern historiography, is thus based on an impossible ideal of objectivity, that we must bracket our interested standpoint and adopt a "permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework" in order to judge historical truth.<sup>65</sup>

If we look more closely at our examples in the light of Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice, it is clear that our five examples are all linked at a more fundamental level of presupposition. Each author has made the anticipatory pre-judgment that *the particular pattern of Jesus' life* is existentially meaningful. Each then attempts to retrieve that pattern with as thick a hermeneutical description of its historicity as possible,

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<sup>64</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 191-92 (§32, regarding the hermeneutic circle); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. rev. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989) 265-307. See also Gadamer's essay "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem", in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 3-17, esp. 9: "the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world."

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Richard J. Bernstein's definition of "objectivism" as "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness", in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) 8.

as determined by the norms of their own epoch. This Christological presupposition, however it is interpreted, is a non-negotiable. The meaningfulness of this pattern guides the search for the details which make it accessible throughout the gospels, and the retrieved historically-verified details in turn demonstrate the rootedness of the pattern in real space and time. This hermeneutic process reflects, in fact, one of the most important insights of recent historical Jesus research. Luke Johnson has argued that what is common to all the gospels, despite their differing agendas, is the fundamental identity of Jesus preserved as "a pattern that was embedded in the earliest Christian experience and memory [and] faithfully mirrored in the Gospel narratives", that is, "the *character* of his life and death." For Johnson, this is the "historic" or real Jesus.<sup>66</sup> More recently James Dunn, in a similar vein, has stressed that "the characteristic and relatively distinctive features of the Jesus tradition are most likely to embody and reflect the consistency and distinctive character of the impact made by Jesus himself."<sup>67</sup> This impact or reception ("Jesus remembered") was preserved and transmitted for the most part in diverse and varying oral performances, and only later put into writing.<sup>68</sup>

All our authors attempt the thick retrieval of Jesus' pattern of life and employ it as a standard over against which they measure human behaviors. Their methods differ, as one might expect, due to differing cultural presuppositions.

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<sup>66</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 152 (embedded pattern), 158 ("*character*"; emphasis original).

<sup>67</sup>James D. G. Dunn, "All that glitters is not gold': In Quest of the Right Key to Unlock the Way to the Historical Jesus", in *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung*, ed. Jens Schröter and Ralph Brucker, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche, vol. 114 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 131-61, at 153.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 149-53. See also idem, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition", *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003) 139-75. The emphases on impact/reception and oral performance are two of the guiding elements of Dunn's own major contribution to the Quest, *Christianity in the Making, Volume I: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

The medievals, in an epoch where the humanity of Jesus was the focus of Christian spirituality, attempt to access Jesus' salvific pattern of life through the normalcy of the humanity which he shares with us, especially through his sufferings. The believer's own sinful humanity, journeying through fallen yet still sacramental creation, can respond to Jesus' own suffering affectively and through imitation, and thus participate in divine life through grace offered by the divine redeemer. The medievals can actualize the Christological presupposition sacramentally through imitation because their view of God and God's relationship to the world remains fundamentally the biblical dialectical view of God: God is knowable yet mysterious, available yet uncontrollable, immanent yet transcendent, present yet absent (in the sense of exceeding all finite human categories of experience). This view remained dominant until the late medieval period, where it began to break down under pressure from the nominalists' overemphasis on God's otherness, omnipotence, and transcendent freedom. God was thus rendered extrinsic to human experience, intrinsically unreachable by any finite means. The continuing history of modernity reflects the simultaneous canonization and rejection of this extrinsic God.<sup>69</sup>

The questers attempt to access Jesus' pattern of life as well, but in a more constrained way. Reimarus, Funk, and Meier work in a Western tradition dominated by the narrative of the extrinsic God and the fundamental disjunction between God and the world. Their "certainty" about the historical Jesus derives not from sacramental presuppositions but rather from historical investigation. The historical particularity of the pattern of Jesus' life is retrieved by isolating clusters of materials (sayings, actions, etc.) and judging their authenticity by various historical and literary criteria. Since the evangelists' framework (i.e., the world of the text) is considered either a trustworthy yet secondary interpretation of the pattern (Meier)

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<sup>69</sup>See Anthony J. Godzieba, "Ontotheology to Excess: Imagining God Without Being", *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 3-20, at 3-4.

or suspected of distortion (Reimarus and Funk), the questers attempt to discern historically verifiable pattern from the clusters of evidence (i.e., a portal into the world behind the text).<sup>70</sup> It is this historically verified pattern that is offered either as a correction to a fraudulent Christianity (Reimarus), a mythologized and irrelevant Christianity (Funk), or tendentious scholarly reconstructions and uses of the historical Jesus (Meier). The varieties of the Quest show that one can access the pattern and thus actualize the Christological presupposition either *intellectually* (Reimarus, using Enlightenment rationalist expectations; Meier, using a more positivist understanding of history) or *affectively* (Funk, using an appeal to authentic existential freedom).

Any detailed evaluation of the worth of these actualizations is a topic for another paper. My own feeling is that, given Gadamer's convincing argument that the moment of understanding is the moment of interpretation is the moment of application, the medievals are actually closer to the mark of grasping the truth of the life of Jesus through their emphasis on praxis or *imitatio*: one must apply the pattern of Jesus' life, already embedded in history, to one's own life if one is to understand the fullness of the possibilities it offers, and one does this best within a tradition constituted as an ensemble of such applicative practices. Funk, strangely enough, actually stands closer to the medievals in this regard than do his questing colleagues. I certainly would not want to do without all the positive gains of the Quest in all its forms, especially with regard to locating Jesus firmly within his Jewish environment, clarifying the prophetic and eschatological elements of his message of the Kingdom of God, discerning the links

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<sup>70</sup>However, see Dunn's prudent warning: "We should *not* work methodologically with any assumption that Jesus must have been different from the Jesus of the Synoptic tradition—as though there must have been a Jesus who made a *different* impact from the one we see in the Jesus tradition, or a Jesus who made *no* discernible impact. . . . The ideal of a 'historical Jesus' behind the Gospels who is accessible to us by historical method, a Jesus who is different from the Synoptic Jesus (otherwise why should we need to look for him), falls into the trap of the old historicism or historical positivism" ("All that glitters is not gold", 147-48).

between his intentions and his death, as well as between his intentions and the development of the early church. But the confusing variety of historical reconstructions, a fact lamented by both practitioners of the Quest as well as theologians, indicates that the way forward is to find a common thread ties together not only the reconstructions that have issued from the various Quests, but also links those reconstructions to all the previous appeals to the life of Jesus that have animated the Christian tradition. That tradition is best understood as a "history of effects", an ensemble of spiritualities and practices that take as their common starting point the presupposition that the pattern of Jesus' life, remembered in scripture and the tradition of lived experience, is *the* meaningful standard of the possibilities of human flourishing.

If we can recognize the criteriological use of the historical life of Jesus—that is, the Christological presupposition—as a non-negotiable element of the tradition, this would create a framework within which to retrieve the valuable contributions to Christology which occurred between Chalcedon and the birth of modern biblical criticism, contributions whose importance for Christian faith and practice has been minimized or even forgotten, due to the hegemony of the historical-critical method. And foregrounding this presupposition can contribute toward helping bridge the gaps between history, theology, and spirituality that continue to plague Christology today. In this way, the activities of the questers can be joined in a productive way with the theologizing of those who have argued for praxis as a way of knowledge in Christology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>E.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church With a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad/London: SCM, , 1985); Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. P. Burns and F. McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Jesus of Piety and the Historical Jesus", *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 49 (1994) 90-99; Anthony J. Godzieba, "Method and Interpretation: The New Testament's Heretical Hermeneutic (Prelude and Fugue)", *The Heythrop Journal* 36 (1995) 286-306.