



The Historical Quest for the Real Jesus

INTRODUCTION

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” — II Peter 1:16

“The most consequential life in human history was lived twenty-one centuries ago in the eastern portion of the Roman empire by a person who never traveled a hundred miles from his birthplace, never held public office, never wrote a book, and died at the hands of the state in his early thirties.” — George Will, The Conservative Sensibility

The Controversy

The Biblical Jesus.

- Peter’s confession – Matt. 16:13, 16.

Revisionist’s Jesus.

- Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments: The Intention of Jesus and His Disciples* (1774-78).

Jesus Matters.

- “Who is Jesus?” is the most decisive question in life.
- Augustine in *The City of God*:
 - ▶ Christianity stands or falls on the reality of who Jesus was and what Jesus did.
- Is the New Testament a reliable witness?
- “The Jesus of history” v. “the Christ of faith.”
- What’s at stake?
 - (1) The historical reliability of the Bible.
 - (2) The validity and credibility of the Christian faith.
 - (3) The reality of Christian spirituality.

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The Uniqueness of Christianity

Why Should Anyone Believe in Christianity?

- (1) Cultural/religious reasons.
- (2) Psychological reasons.
- (3) Sociological reasons.
- (4) Pragmatic reasons.
- (5) Because it's true!
 - ▶ Ultimately, the only reason to believe in Christianity is if it's true.
 - ▶ Bart Ehrman: "Among the many things that made Christianity different from the other religions of the Roman Empire, with the partial exception of Judaism, is that Christians insisted that it did matter what you believed.... Christianity, unlike other religions, was exclusivistic.... The Christian religion came to be firmly rooted in truth claims."
 - ▶ C. S. Lewis: "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important...."
 - ▶ Christianity is a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive biblical worldview that encompasses all of life, all fields of knowledge, and all of reality.

Revelation Through History.

- George Ladd: "The uniqueness of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events."
- The issue of falsifiability.
- The linchpin issue.
 - ▶ II Peter 1:16 – "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."
 - ▶ I Cor. 15:1ff – "... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and he appeared...
 "... [I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile."
 - ▶ Ben Witherington: "Whether Christianity stands or falls depends on certain historical facts.... Among these facts that are most crucial to the Christian faith is the fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The Christian faith is not mere faith in faith [fideism] – but rather a belief about the significance of certain historical events....
 "[T]he resurrection of Jesus is the most important event in all of human history...."

Postscript:

- The New Testament accounts of Jesus' life are not comprehensive, but they are accurate.

Jesus Through the Centuries

A Man for All Times.

- Jeraslav Pelican, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*.
 - “Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.... But it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character. For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny.”

Rabbi and Messiah.

- Biblical basis:
 - Luke 4:16-21.
 - Matt. 16:13-17.
 - Acts 2:36, 38.

The Divine Logos.

- Divine “Reason” or the divine “Word.”
- Biblical basis:
 - John 1:1-12.

King of Kings.

- Constantinian triumphalism.
- “Christ Militant.”
- Biblical basis:
 - Revelation 11:15.
 - Revelation 17:14.

Christ the Mystic.

- Biblical basis:
 - Luke 5:16.
 - I Thess. 5:17.
 - John 14:20.

Prince of Peace.

- The Reformation-era religious wars.
- The Anabaptist and Spiritualist view of Christ.
- Biblical basis:
 - Matt. 5:9.
 - Matt. 26:52.
 - John 18:36.



Jesus: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”



Jesus as “Christ Militant”

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The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels

Luke Timothy Johnson

PREFACE

The Author and the Book

Luke Timothy Johnson.

- Professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology of Emory University.
- Roman Catholic and a former Benedictine monk and priest.

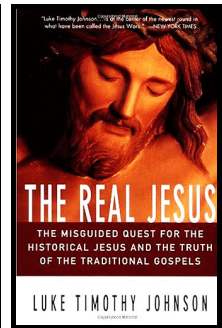
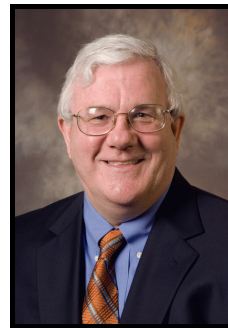
Kudos.

- *Christianity Today*: “One of the most exhilarating religious books published in this decade.”
- N.T. Wright: “This book exposes... the shallowness of much would-be scholarship about Jesus.”

Purpose of the Book.

(1) To challenge the pseudo-scholarship of radical biblical scholars.

- ▶ Luke Timothy Johnson: “I wrote this book to blow the whistle on a form of scholarship I consider misguided and misleading.”
- ▶ LTJ: This book is “not about the Jesus Seminar but about the much more troubling problem of which the Jesus Seminar is only the most irritating... manifestation, namely, the state of biblical scholarship in the present generation.”
- ▶ LTJ: “Much is at stake. If my analysis is correct, the state of biblical scholarship within the church is in critical condition.”



(2) To challenge the idea that “history” is the primary basis for the Christian faith.

(3) To challenge readers to personally experience “the real Jesus.”

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JESUS QUEST

Jesus Re-imagined

Early Christological Heresies.

- Docetism.
- Adoptionism.
- Arianism.
 - *Homoousious* and *homoiousious*.

The Bible Under Fire.

- Marcion (c. 85-160).
- Porphyry (c. 234-305).
- Augustine (354-430), *On the Harmony of the Gospels*.
- Biblical textual criticism.

The Modern Quest for the ‘Historical Jesus’

Enlightenment Rationalism.

- The search for the historical Jesus beneath the layers of doctrine and mythology.
- A secular reaction to the excesses of the Reformation Era.
- The influence of deism.
- Separating the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ of faith.”
- An alternative eschatology.
 - A social evolutionary model.

Historical Criticism.

- The historical/critical approach to Biblical scholarship: the working assumptions.
 - Rationalism.
 - Naturalism (anti-supernaturalism).
 - Skepticism.

Thomas Chubb (1679-1746).

- A revisionist view of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Jesus as a “first-century Palestinian Deist.”
- Later Christian doctrines were attributed to Jesus by the apostle Paul.

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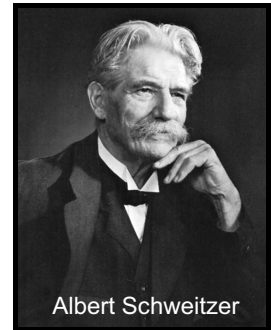
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Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965).

- A Lutheran theologian, medical doctor and missionary.
 - Winner of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize.
- *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906).
 - A non-orthodox view of Jesus.



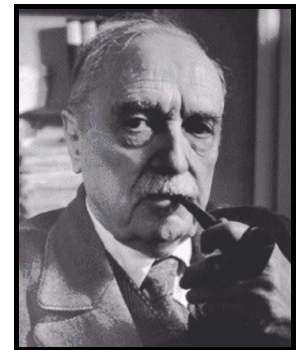
Albert Schweitzer

Martin Kahler (1835-1912).

- *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (1892).
- A Neo-orthodox orientation.
 - The Gospels are authoritative in matters of faith, but not historical.
 - Historical research cannot provide a basis for Christian belief.
 - “We have no sources for a biography of Jesus which measure up to the standards of contemporary historical science.”
 - The quest for the historical Jesus is a journey down “a blind alley.”
- Christian existentialism and the “living Christ.”

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976).

- The prototypical theological liberal.
- A cultural accommodationalist.
 - Involvement in the Confessing Church movement.
 - Neutrality on Nazism.
 - A traditional pastor and a liberal theologian.
- Historical revisionism.
 - Bultmann: “I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources do not exist.”
 - Jesus as a mythological symbol.
- “De-mythologizing” Scripture.
 - Making Christianity “relevant” and acceptable.
 - Separating the true kernel of the Gospel from the husks of superstition and myth.
 - Anti-supernaturalism.
 - Bultmann: It is impossible for anyone who uses electricity to believe in miracles and the New Testament world of demons and spirits.
 - The resurrection myth.
- The problem of an mythological Savior.
- Bultmann’s legacy.



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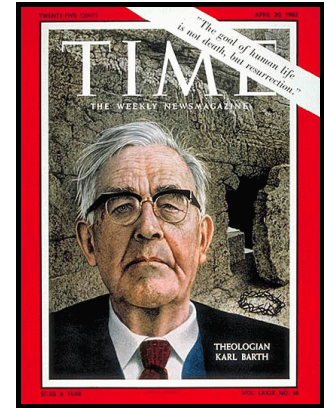
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Karl Barth (1886-1966).

- A conventional liberal theological education.
 - The influence of Adolph von Harnack.
- Involvement in the Confessing Church.
 - Principle author of the Barmen Declaration.
 - Emigration to Switzerland.
- Two decisive influences:
 - (1) The Great War and human depravity.
 - (2) The practicalities of pastoral ministry.
- Biblical existentialist theology.
 - The influence of Kierkegaard.
 - Historical skepticism.
 - Barth: The only certainty about Jesus was that he died on the cross for our sins.



A Neo-Orthodox Reaction.

- Ernst Kasemann and “The Problem of the Historical Jesus” (1953).
- Gunther Bornkamm’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (1956).

The Jesus Quest Since 1960.

- Five Theological Orientations.

Radical	Liberal/Skeptical	Neo-Orthodox	Historical/Skeptical	Conservative
Jesus Seminar	Bart Ehrman	Luke Timothy Johnson	James D.G. Dunn	Ben Witherington
John Dominic Crossan			N. T. Wright	Darrell Bock
John Shelby Spong			John Meier	Gary Habermas
Marcus Borg				William Lane Craig

The Summa.

- C. S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism” (1959).
 - The ignorant arrogance behind the radical historical Jesus Quest.
- Craig Blomberg on irrational anti-supernatural bias.
 - “A proper historiography must allow for the miraculous as a possible explanation for the events that cannot be plausibly explained otherwise. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to begin with an anti-supernaturalist or atheist bias. If there is a God similar to the one theists postulate, then it is eminently reasonable that at times of his choosing he should wish to intervene in the space-time universe and generate events not otherwise attributable to natural processes.”

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Radical Revisionism and The Jesus Seminar

[Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Real Jesus"
Chapter 1: "The Good News and the Nightly News"]

"Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you."
– Robert Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*

The Jesus Seminar

A Pseudo-Scholarly Charade.

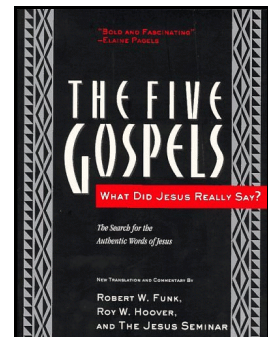
- Luke Timothy Johnson: The Jesus Seminar is “a small, self-selected association of academics who meet twice a year to debate the historical Jesus.”
- Robert Funk and the Westar Institute of Sonoma, California.
- A radical remnant of the Society of Biblical Literature.
- A traveling road show and a media event.

Jesus Seminar



The Agenda.

- *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1993).
 - ▶ “The Scholars Version.”
 - ▶ Robert Funk, et al: “The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth – traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.”
- The goal of the Jesus Seminar is “to liberate Jesus from the Gospels.”
 - ▶ The NT offers up a “mythic” or “cultic” Jesus.”
 - ▶ Funk: “We need a new narrative of Jesus, a new Gospel...”



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Biblical Scholarship and the Culture War

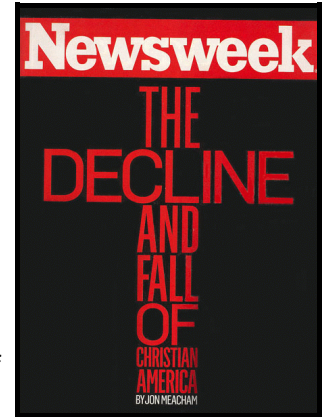
[Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Real Jesus”
Chapter 3: “Cultural Confusion and Collusion”]

Introduction

General Theme and Overview.

- The cultural divide.
- The “cultural mission” of the Jesus Seminar.
- A “post-Christian” era.
- Two contrasting worldviews:
 - (1) Christian theism.
 - (2) Modern secularism.
- Protagoras versus Plato.

Newsweek: “The Decline and Fall of Christian America” (April 13, 2009)



The Key Issues.

- (1) What is the Bible?
 - ▶ Jeffrey D. Breshears: “The Bible is is the revelation of God’s will and purpose for mankind in the context of history and in relation to four doctrinal themes: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.” [*Introduction to Bibliology*, p. 65.]
- (2) Who was the “real Jesus?”
- (3) What is Christianity?
- (4) What is the church?

Two Competing Perceptions.

- The presuppositions.
- The institutional caretakers.
- The muddled reality.

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The Parameters of History

[Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*
Chapter 4: “The Limitations of History”]

The Nature of History

A False Assumption.

- Luke Timothy Johnson: “Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the spate of Historical Jesus books is the authors’ assumption that ‘history’ is unproblematic.”
- In fact, reconstructing history is a complex process.

What Is History?

- *Historia*: A process of inquiry into the past.
- Components of history:
 - (1) Reconstructions of the past.
 - *What* happened, *when* it happened, *where* it happened, and *who* was involved.
 - (2) Interpretations of the past.
 - *Why* and *how* something happened.
 - The *significance* of what happened.
- The problem of historical facts.

Historical Sources.

- Primary sources.
 - ▶ How true and accurate are these accounts?
- Secondary sources.
 - ▶ How long after the fact was the account written?
 - ▶ How true and reliable are these accounts?
- Oral traditions.
 - ▶ The problems of oral transmission.



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Jesus in History

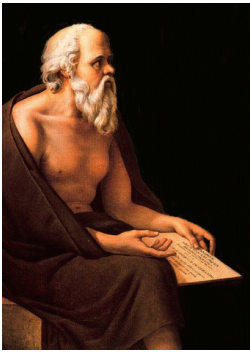
[Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*
Chapter 5: “What’s Historical About Jesus?”]

Historical Problematics

Interpretive Complexities.

- Since “history” is interpretations on the past, no topic is without its problems.

Case Study: The Historical Socrates.

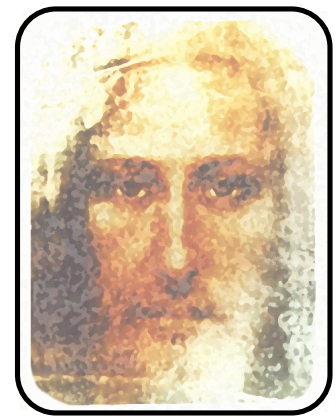


- Who and what was the historical Socrates?
 - The “historical Socrates” is elusive and hard to reconstruct.
- Socrates, according to Aristophanes.
- Socrates, according to Xenophon.
- Socrates, according to Plato.
- Luke Timothy Johnson: Ultimately, the “historical Socrates” cannot be separated from “the Socrates of his interpreters.”
- The Socrates of history is less important than the Socrates of faith (or myth).
- A false analogy.

The New Testament Material

The Gospels.

- (1) The Gospels as ancient biographies.
 - Justin Martyr: The Gospels as “the memoirs of the apostles.”
 - Bruce Metzger: The Gospels as “interpretive portraits” of Christ.
 - The Gospels as “literary compositions.”
- (2) The Gospels were written several decades after the fact.



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Other New Testament Sources.

- Paul’s testimony regarding Jesus.
 - Paul’s presumption.
 - LTJ: “One of the most shocking aspects of recent Historical Jesus books is their complete neglect” of Paul’s testimony regarding Jesus.
- Jesus in the epistles of James, Peter, and Hebrews.
- Points of corroboration.

What Really Matters.

- LTJ: “When the witness of the NT is taken as a whole, a deep consistency can be detected beneath its surface diversity.”

Extra-Biblical Christian Sources

The Church Fathers.

The Apocryphal Gospels.

- The legend of King Abgar V of Edessa.

The Non-Christian Sources

Scattered References.

- Charles Templeton, *Act of God* (1978).
- The issue of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- The issue of the Gnostic Gospels.

Josephus (c. 37-100).

- Josephus on the martyrdom of James “the Just.”
 - James was “the brother of Jesus who was called Christ.” [*Antiquities* 20.9.1]
- The “Testimonium Flavianum.”
 - “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one should call him a man*. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. *He was the Messiah*. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. *For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him*. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.” [*Antiquities* 18.3.3]

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ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not [really] die – he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King [really] die – he lived on in the teaching which he had given.”

The Darkness During the Crucifixion.

- The testimony of **Thallus** in *Third History* (AD 52).
- The testimony of **Tertullian** (c. 160):
 - ▶ “At the same time at noonday there was a great darkness. Those who did not know that this was foretold concerning Christ thought it to be an eclipse. And some have denied it, not knowing the cause of such darkness. And yet you have that remarkable event recorded in your archives.”
- ▶ The testimony of **Julius Africanus** (early 3rd century).
 - ▶ “As to [Jesus’] many works... and the mysteries of his doctrine, and the resurrection from the dead, these have been set forth most authoritatively by his disciples and apostles before us. On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the rocks were broken apart by an earthquake, and many places in Judaea and other districts were destroyed. In his *History*, Thallus mentions this darkness and calls it an eclipse of the sun. But the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Savior falls on the day before the Passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun.”
- The testimony of **Phlegon** in *Collection of Olympiads and Chronicles* (2nd century).
- The testimony of **Eusebius** in *Chronicle* (c. 330).
 - ▶ “All which things agree with what happened at the time of our Savior’s passion. And so writes Phlegon, an excellent compiler of the Olympiads in his 13th book, saying: ‘In the fourth year of the two hundred and second Olympiad there was a great and extraordinary eclipse of the sun, distinguished among all that had happened before. At the sixth hour the day was turned into dark night, so that the stars in the heavens were seen, and there was an earthquake in Bithynia that destroyed many houses in the city of Nice.’”

Lingering Questions.

- If Jesus was so important, why didn’t more ancient authors write about him?
- What accounts for the lack of interest on the part of Roman chroniclers?
- Why didn’t Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC-50 AD) mention Jesus?

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